“MTV Aesthetics” at the Movies: Interrogating a Film Criticism Fallacy

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MTV debuted on cable television in August of 1981 in only a few US markets, airing music videos introduced by awkward video jockeys. In fact, according to historians of MTV, it was not until January of 1983 that the channel really took off, when it expanded more fully into most markets around the country—including, for the first time, New York and Los Angeles (Denisoff; McGrath). And yet that same year, upon the release of Adrian Lyne’s Flashdance (1983), American film critics already had begun to observe that Hollywood films were unduly influenced by the music video form and by MTV in particular. In its review, Variety described Flashdance as “pretty much like looking at MTV for 96 minutes. Virtually plotless, exceedingly thin on characterization and sociologically laughable, pic at least lives up to its title by offering an anthology of extraordinarily flashy dance numbers” (12). A few months later, Roger Ebert opined that Staying Alive (1983), a “sequel to the gutsy, electric Saturday Night Fever, is a slick, commercial cinematic jukebox, a series of self-contained song-and-dance sequences that could be cut apart and played forever on MTV” (Staying).

More than two decades later, MTV is still a common critical shorthand and reference point, as similar critiques of Hollywood films and their form continue unabated not only among mainstream journalistic critics, but also, in an indication of its cultural ubiquity, among academic writers, alternative media critics, amateur critics, and fans posting reviews online. References in contemporary film criticism to “MTV visuals,” “MTV-style editing,” “the MTV generation,” “post-MTV filmmaking,” and the like constitute what I will call the “MTV aesthetics trope.” It is significant that this trope actually cites “MTV” specifically as part of its discourse; as I discuss below, there is a world of discursive difference between a critical trope that references MTV’s influence and one that simply references the influence of music videos. The fact that the MTV aesthetics trope persists even today, when the vast majority of videos are screened and seen via television channels and media other than MTV—which has long since cut back on its airing of videos—is a further testament both to the staying power of this critical reflex and to the fact that the “MTV” in the MTV aesthetics trope serves a predominantly symbolic function (Caramanica sec. 2:1).

The foundation of the MTV aesthetics trope is a fairly straightforward and concrete critique associating contemporary Hollywood filmmaking with the music video form, although it also typically coexists with much more symbolic and connotative importations about what MTV and its audience represent (see below). The foundational critique is concerned with three interrelated characteristics of recent Hollywood film. The first is the frequent use of (mainly nondiegetic) popular songs for a film’s soundtrack, especially for montage sequences of characters.
dancing, fighting, falling in love, trying on clothes, and so on. Although still noted by critics discussing current films, this continues to be a particularly common point to make about films of the early-to-mid-1980s, such as the aforementioned *Flashdance* and *Staying Alive*, as well as *Footloose* (1984), *Top Gun* (1986), *Dirty Dancing* (1987), and *Rocky IV* (1985), of which Ebert wrote: “There are endless, unnecessary songs on the soundtrack; half the time, we seem to be watching MTV . . .” (*Rocky*).

The second and third cinematic characteristics that form the foundation of the MTV aesthetics trope relate to the perception that many Hollywood films since the origins of MTV have become showy exercises in technique and style. The second characteristic is the tendency of films since the early 1980s to privilege gloss, atmospherics, and camerawork. According to this critique, films too often serve up production design and especially cinematography and direction clearly meant to be noticed and appreciated on their own burnished terms. The third characteristic is the one referred to most often by critics, especially since the 1990s. Recent Hollywood films, it is said, fly by their audiences at a breakneck pace and with jittery rhythms, apparently trying to mimic MTV videos, which do the same thing three or four minutes at a time. Part of that pace and rhythm is achieved in a particularly conspicuous way—via manic editing that often features flash-cuts, jump-cuts, and the stirring together of varied film stocks, colors, and speeds.

Examples of these last two elements of the MTV aesthetics trope, often loaded with value judgments about MTV and its audience, abound. While mocking the “pretentious touches” of Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers* (1994), Jeff Millar of the *Houston Chronicle* called it “Stone’s attempt to reinvent himself as the world’s oldest rookie MTV video director” (“U-Turn”). Writing in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, Sean Axmaker observed that *Crime + Punishment in Suburbia* (2000) “looks every inch the MTV video, shot through a lens so smeared in petroleum jelly it made me want to scream ‘Focus!’ throughout. . . . [The] embar-rassingly misguided direction is artificial and airless. (“Gen-MTV”). And in a 2001 anthology of academic criticism, Wheeler Winston Dixon laments how “MTV hyperedited ‘shot fragment’ editing has become the rule for dramas and action films. An entire new generation of viewers became visually hooked on the assaultive grabbing power of MTV’s rapid cutting . . .” (360).

Even when offering some praise for “MTV aesthetics” and for filmmakers who employ them, as critics do on occasion, a swipe is often just around the corner. Thus Janet Maslin of the *New York Times*, in a review of *Enemy of the State* (1998), pays director Tony Scott a lukewarm compliment—“[Scott] keep[s] the story moving faster than the speed of scrutiny”—only to follow it with a parenthetical putdown: “(though John Frankenheimer’s *Ronin* achieved the same high velocity without benefit of MTV tricks)” (E1).

Sean Burns of the *Philadelphia Weekly* does something similar in his review of Scott’s *Spy Game* (2001), but this time Scott passes muster and everyone else must wear a scarlet “MTV” affixed to their chests. “There’s nothing Scott loves more than slick, gimmicky shots of attractive movie stars . . .” Burns writes, “but he’s . . . the only director out there using the rapid-fire MTV aesthetic as a narrative technique instead of a distraction” (“Big Budget Brains”).

There is, to be sure, some truth to these claims and to the MTV aesthetics trope in general. These critics are to some extent correct when they call attention to certain Hollywood trends and trace some similarities to music videos; for example, in the simplest connect-the-dots approach, it is of course true that several high-profile directors working in Hollywood today got their start, or close to it, making music videos, including Michael Bay, David Fincher, Michel Gondry, Spike Jonze, and Dominic Sena. (That said, the aesthetics of these videos have always been far from monolithic, and the actual airing of music videos on MTV is increasingly rare [Reiss and Feineman; Vernallis].) Some of the critics who cite MTV’s influence are no doubt aware that
such references are simplistic and somewhat wrongheaded, useful mainly as throwaway lines or as critical shorthand in reviews that do not allow for much nuance or elaboration. In addition, I have no great interest in defending films like those mentioned above—although, as I argue below, the critical dismissal of them is too often self-satisfied and facile.2 My purpose instead will be to explore what I see as the significant flaws in this trope as it has come to be used in American film criticism. There are three interrelated problems with it, the first being that it is ahistorical—it ignores the abundant evidence that doesn’t fit into its media-history timeline. The other two problems with the MTV aesthetics trope are that it typically works with problematic assumptions derived from “medium specificity” theory and is weighted down with hysterical judgments of what MTV and its audience represent. These judgments are manifest in the timeworn, untenable binary oppositions that critics tend to set up between, on the one hand, who they are and what real and good film culture is, and, on the other, what MTV and its attendant badness is, the most significant being art versus commerce, adult culture versus youth culture, and ideas, humanity, narrative, and coherence versus distraction, chaos, superficiality, and meaninglessness. All of these problems obfuscate and elide important truths about filmmaking and its evolution, about audiences, and about the contemporary mass media landscape in general—truths that recede further into the background each time this seemingly obvious and innocuous trope is employed. I conclude by speculating about the possible reasons for the staying power of this film criticism fallacy.

“MTV Aesthetics”: A Revised History

As outlined above, the MTV aesthetics trope usually implies (or states outright) the following history of contemporary Hollywood filmmaking and the influence of an upstart cable channel: beginning in 1983, and accelerating in the 1990s, film form began mimicking MTV, with results almost entirely for the worse. Media historian Steven Stark offers the common view that “By 1983, MTV was already influencing movie-making: Much of the popular Flashdance was little more than a dance video at greater length” (327). In this sort of historical accounting, as epitomized by Thomas Delapa in the Boulder Weekly, “American feature filmmaking” has been “comatose” “ever since the early 1980s,” when movies got “caught up in a witches brew” of, among other things, “MTV cutting” (“Screen”). David Ehrenstein of Slate.com also traces the recent “downward spiral” of serious filmmaking back to the 1980s, when “we were suddenly drowning in teentpix, Simpson-Bruckheimer-style Go For It movies, and mismatched-buddy cop flics. The MTV aesthetic hadn’t enlarged the vocabulary of storytelling—it had dumbed it down” (“Very Un-Sucky”). Similarly, Jon Niccum’s Lawrence Journal-World dismissal of The Matrix: Revolutions (2003) as “a boring, joyless exercise in post-MTV filmmaking” is one of many references to a “post-MTV era” and to “post-MTV filmmaking,” all of which rest on the same reductive tale (Matrix). The nostalgia for an imagined, Edenic past—before MTV—is particularly strong and misguided in an efilmcritic.com review of What Lies Beneath (2000) posted by Erik Childress: “Living in the post-MTV era where a large number of the populace has the patience and span of a schizophrenic with attention-deficit disorder, What Lies Beneath is a hark back to the old days of filmmaking” (What Lies).

Again, this history is not entirely inaccurate; it would be wrong to argue that music videos—along with comics, video games, and other media forms—have had no influence on filmmaking since the 1980s.3 But there are significant problems with this history, the obvious and overriding one being that the characteristics most often identified as “MTV aesthetics”—the pop songs strung together on the soundtrack, the flashy cinematic style, and the fast-paced, conspicuous editing—have demonstrable origins in five developments in the two decades (and more) before MTV began. These developments and their effects are
particularly apparent in American films made between 1967 and 1982.4

First, there is the influence of international and avant-garde filmmaking, in particular the French New Wave and related movements throughout Europe in the 1950s and 1960s; American experimental and avant-garde filmmaking of the postwar era; and the 1980s boom of Hong Kong action filmmaking. It is a story often told that the European cinema of the 1950s and 1960s had a profound effect on the so-called New Generation of filmmakers that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, which included older filmmakers such as Arthur Penn, Stanley Kubrick, John Cassavetes, Robert Altman, Mike Nichols, Bob Rafelson, and Sam Peckinpah in addition to such usual suspects as Francis Ford Coppola, Dennis Hopper, William Friedkin, Brian DePalma, Martin Scorsese, George Lucas, and Steven Spielberg (Biskind, Easy; Cowie).5 Several prominent films made by these directors and their contemporaries show the influence of what might be generically described as the European New Wave, and their work through the early 1980s exhibits some of the same qualities that critics have identified as MTV aesthetics, especially the conspicuous and self-consciously provocative design, directorial style, and editing.6 These qualities are most notable in such films as Bonnie and Clyde (1967), The Graduate (1967), Head (1968), Easy Rider (1969), The Wild Bunch (1969), The French Connection (1971), Mean Streets (1973), Nashville (1975), Taxi Driver (1975), Star Wars (1977), The Driver (1978), Apocalypse Now (1979), Dressed to Kill (1980), Raging Bull (1980), Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981), and One From the Heart (1982).7

Although in a necessarily indirect and diluted way, postwar American experimental and avant-garde filmmaking has also had an undeniable influence on Hollywood filmmaking as it has evolved since the 1960s (and as it is manifested in the last two-plus decades). In fact, some of the characteristics that have come to make up the ostensible MTV aesthetic in the American cinema could be found decades earlier in the work of Stan Brakhage, Bruce Conner, and Kenneth Anger, and in even earlier work like Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali’s Un Chien Andalou (1928) and Jean Cocteau’s Blood of a Poet (1930). Anger’s Scorpio Rising (1963) and Conner’s Breakaway (1967), to take just two examples, are stylistic precursors of several more famous films. For instance, Dennis Hopper was friends with and found inspiration from

Photo 1: (Left to right) Billy (Dennis Hopper), Wyatt (Peter Fonda), and George (Jack Nicholson) hit the open road to a pounding rock soundtrack in the experimental counterculture classic Easy Rider (1969).

Hollywood filmmaking has continued to show the influence of international cinema in recent years, especially Hong Kong action films. The action sequences that critics so often link to MTV aesthetics, especially since the 1990s, often reflect the popularity of the John Woo-Tsui Hark-Ringo Lam wave of Hong Kong films and the eventual migration of those filmmakers and some of their associates—such as fight choreographer Yuen Woo-Ping—to the US. \(^8\) *True Romance* (1993), *Face/Off* (1997), *The Matrix* (1999), and *Charlie’s Angels* (2000) are just a few of the films that, according to the conventions of this trope, could be seen as MTV offspring. In reality, however, as MTV was making its debut in the early 1980s, an important movement of Hong Kong action filmmaking was beginning on the other side of the globe, building upon the previous international success of the Shaw Brothers and Bruce Lee (Stokes and Hoover 17–37). And that filmmaking style has taken hold, for better or worse, in Hollywood action films made since the 1990s—to a greater extent than “MTV aesthetics” has. Stephen Holden’s *New York Times* review of *Cradle 2 the Grave* (2003) is a telling example of reflex-like references to MTV that neglect the recent influence of the Hong Kong tradition; despite the fact that the film stars Jet Li and features fight sequences that fans of his earlier films have come to expect, Holden’s only reference to style and technique is the fact that the film would have been improved had the director “relaxed his camera and reprogrammed his editorial shredding machine. . . . [Bartkowiak, the director] likes his MTV-style editing so much that in his drive for hyperkinetic overkill he sacrifices coherence to wallow in barely contained chaos” (E17). Overkill indeed.

Another important factor elided by the MTV aesthetics trope is the technological changes that have taken place in the industry since the 1970s. To be sure, like all of the other developments discussed here, these changes are inextricably linked with other factors and cannot be understood in isolation from economics, aesthetics, and demographics. But it is nevertheless important to consider how the technological innovations of the period not only responded to and developed alongside the supposed “MTV aesthetics,” but also facilitated them.

The most significant of these changes have affected sound recording, theatrical sound systems, and electronic and nonlinear editing. Advances in sound technology were taking place throughout the 1970s, but the release of *Star Wars* (1977) marked a turning point in the quality of cinematic sound. Dolby noise reduction had been used as early as Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), and Ken Russell’s *Tommy* (1975) had been the first true Dolby stereo release, but the huge success of *Star Wars* and the apparent role that sound played in that success, especially in compatible theaters, spurred the transition from monaural sound tracks to stereo optical sound, and to more advanced theatrical sound systems. By 1979, there were twelve hundred Dolby-equipped theaters in the US, a sharp increase over just a few years earlier, and by 1984 more than six thousand theaters in forty-five countries, the bulk of them in prime, first-run locations around the US, were equipped with the new system. On top of these changes, George Lucas began work in 1980 on the development of what would in 1982 become the THX system of “optimal” theatrical sound. That year also saw the introduction of digital audio CDs, which further stimulated conversions to more refined digital audio in production and exhibition. By the mid-1980s nearly 90 percent of all Hollywood films were being released with Dolby stereo sound (Cook 54, 217, 408; Prince, *Pot* 292–93). The potential of this improved sound technology—more popular music on the soundtrack, for instance—was obvious, and for the most part it was being exploited before MTV and its supposed effects appeared.

Similarly consequential was the transition from linear editing via physically handling, cutting, and splicing film, to nonlinear electronic and digital editing systems. Experiments in electronic and video editing were taking place
throughout the 1970s, and in Apocalypse Now and One from the Heart (1982) Coppola took important steps in the development of such methods. The year 1982 also saw the introduction of two elements that would pave the way for random-access digital-electronic editing when Kodak introduced a way to record time code in transparent magnetic coding on each frame of film, and CMX introduced a semicomputerized version of a flatbed editing system (Cook 393–94; Prince, Pot 111–15; Fairservice 330–37). Oliver Stone was one of the early adopters of these new methods as they were refined in the 1980s and 1990s, and not coincidentally it is in JFK (1991) and Natural Born Killers (1994) that a shift in Hollywood editing style (and cinematography) can be discerned—toward an often faster and more expressionistic mix of imagery, including varied film stocks, colors, and speeds. One could of course argue that it was Stone’s desire to adopt such a style which led him to these technologies and methods, and not vice-versa. Regardless, an understanding of why many current Hollywood films are cut and move in the way that they do must acknowledge that technological changes made it substantially easier to edit with experimental whimsy and abandon. It certainly makes more sense to say, for instance, that along with the French New Wave, avant-garde filmmaking, and perhaps psychotropic drugs, nonlinear electronic editing has affected the style of Stone’s films more than an attempt to ape MTV has.

The third of the five interrelated developments that began before MTV is the ideological and economic changes that have taken place since the 1970s. As the US moved to the right after the 1960s, films like Star Wars and Raiders of the Lost Ark not only (partly) reflected that shift but also pointed toward the huge profits and synergistic ancillary revenues available from widely released, big-budget, special-effects “blockbusters” and “high concept” films. Such industry trends were facilitated by political economic changes in the 1970s and later, the most crucial of which were corporate deregulation and the easing of antitrust restrictions (Ryan and Kellner; Wyatt; Prince, Pot).

The marketing and cross-promotional strategies that both stimulated and were afforded by that environment were underway before MTV (although MTV no doubt added to the resources available), and those strategies further stimulated the use of popular songs on soundtracks, building on a trend that had begun in the 1960s (see below). One could argue with the notion that the conservative ideology of this period was specifically conducive to high-concept films featuring blaring soundtracks, like those that took off in the 1980s. But it is clear that the changing political economy and media industry trends in marketing and synergy epitomized...
by films like *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), with its box office and soundtrack success, fueled the look, sound, and promotional strategy of a film like *Flashdance* as much as MTV did (Wyatt 139–44; Smith 186–229).

*Saturday Night Fever* was one of countless films from the 1967–82 period that were pop/rock/soul musical experiences—at least at moments—as much as they were visual ones. There were certainly precedents for this from the 1950s and the early 1960s both in the US and in Europe, including *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), *It’s Trad, Dad!* (1962), *Band of Outsiders* (1964), and, most significantly, Richard Lester’s Beatles films, *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965). It has become a commonplace that these two films established some of the “vocabulary” of MTV, and indeed that is so (Ehrenstein and Reed 13–63; Mundy 97–126; Neaverson). But it was in the late 1960s that the use of popular music in film increased and widened in scope, something reflected in the period’s rock musicals, music documentaries, concert films, and films with (frequently) nondiegetic pop music soundtracks (Smith 154–85). A list of those films would include, among others like *The Graduate* and *Easy Rider* mentioned above, *Don’t Look Back* (1967), *Monterey Pop* (1969), *Woodstock* (1970), *Superfly* (1972), *Phantom of the Paradise* (1974), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), *The Song Remains the Same* (1976), *Grease* (1978), *The Kids Are Alright* (1979), *The Blues Brothers* (1980), and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982).

This unprecedented wedding of rock music with Hollywood film is another pre-MTV development that fed these supposed MTV aesthetics, and it is very much rooted in time and place—the postwar baby boom and the rise of rock ‘n’ roll. For many boomers and those slightly older, including much of Hollywood’s New Generation, new music was essential to their cultural landscape, which meant that both filmmakers and audiences were primed for more of this music on film (Smith 165; Biskind, *Easy*). For example, 1973 alone saw the release of Lucas’s *American Graffiti*, Scorcese’s *Mean Streets*, Peckinpah’s *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid*, *The Mack*, and *Jesus Christ Superstar*—ten years before MTV arrived on the national scene. The first four of these films relied heavily on music for their appeal (Smith 169–85; J. Miller 304–17), and the last was significant not only for being one of the first “rock opera” musicals, but also for its groundbreaking efforts to sell its soundtrack, theatrical musical, and film, aspects of which producer Robert Stigwood repeated to even greater success with *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease* (Wyatt 139–45).

The fifth and last of the interrelated devel-
opments that, to a great extent before MTV, have fueled the so-called MTV aesthetics of Hollywood film, is television (other than MTV)—specifically commercials, cable television, video cassette recorders, and the remote control. Television commercials’ glossiness and fast rhythms have often been cited as pernicious influences on Hollywood film aesthetics, and much of that story predates MTV, including the transition, during the 1970s, to thirty-second spots and shorter and shorter shot durations. Another influence was the influx of TV-commercial directors working in Europe who went on to direct such “MTV-era” films as *Flashdance* (Adrian Lyne), *Manhunter* (1986; Michael Mann), and *Top Gun* (Tony Scott) (Wyatt 26; J. Miller 186–246; Gleick 187–88). Along with Stallone, Stone, Baz Luhrmann, and producers Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer, these TV-commercial veterans are the filmmakers most often identified with the MTV aesthetic, and in each case their styles and common flourishes were already on display by 1982. The often glossy, stylized, arguably indulgent filmmaking, including the frequent use of rock music, can be found in abundance in Alan Parker’s *Bugsy Malone* (1976), *Fame* (1980), and *Pink Floyd—The Wall* (1982); Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982); Lyne’s *Foxes* (1980); and Mann’s *Thief* (1981). What might be called an advertising aesthetic even found its way into films of this period by non-TV-commercial veterans, like Paul Schrader’s *American Gigolo* (1980). *Gigolo* features an opening-credits montage set to Blondie’s “Call Me,” during which the title character drives a fancy car, buys designer clothes, and does business with wealthy clients. In addition to looking like sequences in later films so often compared to MTV, this montage also looks very much like a commercial for luxury goods and an idealized lifestyle (J. Miller 186–246; Jackson 158–60, 164).

The rise of cable and the VCR, along with the proliferation of remote-control devices, are other key, intertwined factors in the evolution of Hollywood aesthetics in recent decades. All three of these television-related technologies saw significant growth in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and all have likely played substantial roles in the trends toward attention-grabbing filmmaking, faster action in particular. The years 1975–81 in particular were crucial, as all of the studios started home-video divisions, video stores appeared for the first time, satellite delivery of programming began, a court ruling eased FCC restrictions on cable-casting current movies, and virtually all of today’s most popular cable channels were introduced, including HBO, ESPN, CNN, USA, TBS, BET, Bravo, Nickelodeon, Showtime, and, finally, MTV. The rapid penetration of both cable and VCRs into US households was well underway during this period, and would soon reach 50 percent by the mid-1980s (Walker and Stumo; Wasser).

Meanwhile, alongside this growth in cable and video, the increased use of remote control devices allowed viewers to control what they were watching to an unprecedented extent—to “graze” rapidly across more and more channels and form their own programming collage, or to stop or speed up a videotape when it failed to sufficiently arrest them (Bellamy and Walker; Gleick 181–86). And yet, in a simplistic attribution of responsibility, critics tend to blame the supposedly shortened attention spans of the “MTV generation” for changes in Hollywood film aesthetics without first locating this unwieldy group—as well as those much older—in its historical-technological context. As I argue throughout this article, these changes were on display in many pre-MTV films, and so were probably nurturing and cultivating audience expectations for action that was even faster and louder.

These interrelated historical developments played crucial parts in the evolution of MTV aesthetics in Hollywood, and it is noteworthy that most of them began and even flourished before MTV. For the sake of clarity, this argument has so far been simplistic itself. In particular, there has been too little said about the inevitable cross-pollination and multivariant influences shared across media and art forms in the contemporary period—most importantly, the ways in which all of the developments dis-
cussed above, most of them related to film, not only shaped Hollywood film but also MTV and its videos. Often built into the MTV aesthetics trope is the implication that, perhaps A Hard Day's Night aside, MTV has always been fundamentally and intrinsically of and about television, and so does not have basic roots in or similarities to the cinema—just as the cinema should have no roots in or connection to MTV (or TV in general). This implication flows from highly suspect, value-laden assumptions about media and their essential nature, assumptions embedded in “medium specificity” theory.

**Problematic Faith in Medium Specificity**

Medium specificity theory is rooted in the study of art, most notably in G. E. Lessing’s *Laocoon*, an eighteenth-century philosophical treatise. Following a line from essentialism, Lessing argued that because of the physical properties of each artistic medium, each art form must necessarily have specific properties, capacities, and effects that are appropriate only to itself.

Clement Greenberg brought the medium specificity argument into the twentieth century, most famously in his 1940 essay on abstract art, “Towards a Newer Laocoon.” Greenberg proposed that “purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art. . . . It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself” (32).

Film theorists also weighed in on the subject of (cinematic) medium specificity throughout the early and mid-twentieth century, sometimes by simply asking questions like the one André Bazin famously posed: “What is Cinema?” There was a certain essentialism inherent in such a question, which earlier theorists such as Rudolph Arnheim and Siegfried Kracauer had made explicit—particularly Arnheim in his essay “New Laocoon.” As video historian James Moran puts it: “[D]espite variations of agenda . . . film theorists from the turn of the century into the 1970s shared an elemental pursuit: to identify and define the essence of cinema as an autonomous medium of artistic production” (xi). It is now clear that another pursuit in which these theorists were engaged was the very legitimation of this specific medium as art—in contrast to other technologies of the time, and later.

Other film theorists have rejected medium specificity theory, especially Noel Carroll, for whom “the task of the theorist of an art is not to determine the unique features of the medium but to explain how and why the medium has been adapted to prevailing and emerging styles . . .” (35). While not challenging cinema’s potential as art, such an argument tends to suggest that film does not necessarily have peculiar essences, is not so distinct from other media forms, including video, and further that those media too may yield art. Similar challenges have also been made to the medium specificity argument by media theorists and critics. Marshall McLuhan famously suggested that the content of every medium is another, previous medium—that the ‘content’ of TV,” for instance, “is the movie” (ix). And Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have described the way new media evolve as “remediation”—the honoring, rivaling, and refashioning of older media. Writing of digital visual media in particular, they argue that “No medium today . . . [does] its cultural work in isolation from other media, any more than it works in isolation from other social and economic forces. What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media” (15). They add that as “arguably the most important popular art form of the twentieth century, film is especially challenged by new media” (147).

Even if one assumes that film was medium specific when first invented, its history since has been of the constant erosion of that specificity. For some, the arrival of “talkies” ruined what had been a pure, silent art by turning it into variations on the theater and the phonograph record (Clair 137), and by “smash[ing] many of the forms that the film artists were using in favor of the inartistic demand for the
greatest possible ‘naturalness’” (Arnheim 154). The essentialism of medium specificity theory is apparent here, as is the fear of new media’s clouding and damaging film’s ostensible status as a pristine art. Television’s arrival, and especially its ability to show movies on its own or connected to a video player, challenged film’s medium specificity even more, as has digitized film sharing, copying, and exhibition (Balio; Wasser; Zacharek). These technological developments and their aesthetic implications, along with contemporaneous trends toward media conglomeration, have spelled the virtual end of essentialist notions of cinematic medium specificity—to the extent it ever existed.

And yet when employing the MTV aesthetics trope, critics usually imply that MTV is what it is, film is something else, and the shotgun commingling of their styles, conventions, and filmmakers is therefore fundamentally wrong. This clinging to medium specificity is especially wrongheaded in the (post)modern age of mass- and multimedia, for some of the reasons outlined above. More interesting and revealing, however, are the critical schema and implied value judgments—all of them basically hollow—that are embedded in this adherence to, and apparent longing for, cinematic medium specificity in the so-called MTV era.

Untenable Oppositions and the Symbolism of “MTV”

When lamenting the influence of MTV aesthetics, and at least by implication yearning for cinematic medium specificity, critics set up several binary oppositions that, upon examination, bring into sharp relief the fallaciousness of the MTV aesthetics trope. The most common of these interlinked, untenable oppositions is ideas, humanity, narrative, and coherence versus distraction, chaos, superficiality, and meaninglessness (a.k.a. the postmodern) (Bignell; Goodwin). The overriding suggestion here is that in contrast to real films, complete with stories, recognizably human characters, and coherent expressions of meaning, MTV aesthetics make for a loud, over-the-top, too-fast mess—one that ultimately has no humanity, no significance. Wheeler Winston Dixon contends, for instance, that the “MTV hyperedited ‘shot fragment’ editing” in films today manifests itself in a “hysterical blenderization of visuals. . . . excess is the dominant characteristic” (360). Along the same lines, the Washington Post’s Desson Howe is unimpressed with Days of Thunder’s (1990) “barrage of macho-MTV images and blaring, youth-adulatory music. This movie, if nothing else, is loud: Whizzz! Vroom! Nyeooooow! as those high-performance cars fly past the camera” (53).

In the same newspaper, in an example of critics lamenting MTV aesthetics because they overwhelm anything worthwhile, Jane Horwitz writes that Luhrmann’s Moulin Rouge (2001) features a “dizzying MTV aesthetic. . . . It’s dazzling, but the gimmickry undercuts the movie’s emotional impact” (49). Similarly, Reel.com’s Pam Grady writes that Sofia Coppola’s Marie Antoinette (2006) “at times plays like an elaborate music video, and with about as much substance.” Going further, Jonathan Foreman of the New York Post chastises Michael Mann for being influenced by MTV in the making of Ali (2001), not just because it resulted in a bad film but because it disrespects its subject: “[This] sketchy biopic . . . in which style repeatedly tramples substance, actually does the great man a disservice. . . . [Mann] uses Ali essentially as a linking device for a potted MTV-style history of the ’60s and early ’70s. . . .” (48). These filmmakers should have heeded critic Jeff Millar, who notes that Stone’s Natural Born Killers had a fundamental flaw and was doomed to fail: “an MTV directing style can’t be used for didactic purposes because MTV isn’t intended to add up to anything.”

The opposition of art and high culture versus commerce and mass culture is also embedded in the MTV aesthetics trope, and the valuations are no less facile. MTV aesthetics films apparently can never be art, can never challenge us, touch us, or better us, but rather will always be a crass, commercial product cranked out for the masses. Ebert’s reference, quoted earlier, to Staying Alive as a “slick, commercial cinematic
jukebox, a series of self-contained song-and-dance sequences that could be cut apart and played forever on MTV," is a good example of this—as is his contrast of this film with its "gutsy" predecessor, *Saturday Night Fever* (despite the fact that *Fever* broke new ground in its preplanned marketing) (1983). Robert Elder of the *Chicago Tribune* takes a different route toward emphasizing the base commercialism of MTV in his review of *XXX* (2002), which consists of an imagined discussion among industry “Suits” brainstorming about what the film would be. Their cynical powwow includes references to MTV aesthetics and to MTV’s selling power while citing a need for films that are "pre-sold and critic proof" (C1).

These critics would no doubt admit that the vast majority of Hollywood films do not qualify as art (however defined), but blaming this on the lowbrow commercialism of MTV aesthetics implies that they are holding out for its opposite—something more pure, less machine-made. Ehrenstein suggests exactly that in his 1999 Slate.com piece when, after looking back to the 1980s and declaring that “the MTV aesthetic hadn’t enlarged the vocabulary of storytelling—it had dumbed it down,” he deemed “this past year—the last year of cinema’s first whole century—as the most hopeful since the 1970s. . . . [T]he aforementioned ‘MTV aesthetic’ is beginning to come of age. Thank God—and Godard” (“Very Un-sucky”). Although this is one of the few instances of a critic seeing cinematic benefits to such aesthetics, Ehrenstein nevertheless sets up another facile opposition, this time within the larger one: bad MTV aesthetics (lowbrow junk rooted in the wretched 1980s) versus good MTV aesthetics (cool and challenging art rooted in the free-wheeling 1960s).

MTV aesthetics films apparently transgress even more terribly when their source material is itself high culture. It is on these occasions when echoes of Dwight MacDonald come through most clearly, as critics lament the ways mass culture (read MTV) has mined and debased the classics. For example, in his review of *Crime + Punishment in Suburbia*, Sean Axmaker writes that “the guilt” of Dostoevsky’s novel “meets the adolescent angst-chic of the MTV generation in the latest installation of literary classics for teens. . . . [T]he biggest crime is turning the story into an overheated, sensationalistic movie-of-the-week. . . . [T]his film would do well not to advertise its inspiration. It only makes it look sillier” (“Gen-TV”). Several reviews of Luhrmann’s *Romeo & Juliet* (1996) also expressed these sentiments. Ebert, for instance, takes pains to make it clear that he is not averse to updated versions of classics, then declares of the film that “The desperation with which it tries to ‘update’ the play and make
it ‘relevant’ is greatly depressing. . .  [A] film that (a) will dismay any lover of Shakespeare, and (b) bore anyone lured into the theater by promise of gang wars, MTV-style. This production was a very bad idea" (William). Posting at Amazon.com, meanwhile, “Stewart” vents that “This modern MTV version of Romeo & Juliet is another piece of trash taken from classic literature. . . . [M]ostly for the MTV teen crowd, with fast cuts and constantly moving cameras” (“Mostly MTV”).

These reviews are also examples of the last of the untenable oppositions embedded in the MTV aesthetics trope, namely the one between adult culture, which the critic inevitably associates with him- or herself, and youth culture, which fares quite poorly in comparison. As part of this trope, the symbolism of the “MTV” itself is enough to trivialize the films in question—simply by associating them with contemporary youth and their values, interests, and concerns, all of which are insignificant, unhealthy, or both. The academic film historian Ronald Davis, for example, offers this perspective on youth and MTV aesthetics: “Flashdance mirrored frivolous attitudes of teenagers interested in dancing, fashion, and enjoying a good time. . . . [I]t has the look of an MTV production. . . . Footloose, similar lightweight entertainment, followed in 1984 . . .” (156). Often the connection is made between a film’s aesthetics and a whole hopeless generation, as in other Amazon.com reviews of Luhrmann’s Romeo & Juliet. “Andre S. Grindle,” for instance, posts that the film is “obviously designed to pander to the cultureless, cynical, MTV-generation, pseudo-grunge teens” (“So Very”), while “Larry” asserts that the film was “built to satisfy the needs of the miserable MTV-microwave-dinner generation” (“Shame”).

The most common disorder attributed to this generation is an abnormally short attention span, a problem that is apparently the cause and effect of both MTV and MTV-influenced films. Critics never tire of citing the contemporary audience’s “patience and span of a schizophrenic with attention-deficit disorder,” as Childress does in his efilmcritic.com review of What Lies Beneath, or of opining, as Eric Robinette does, that “the influence of MTV and short attention spans gets to be a real curse” when manifested in films like Underworld (2003). Even when critics do not dismiss such films or their audiences out of hand, the references to attention deficits remain. That is the case with Manohla Dargis’s New York Times review of Doug Liman’s Mr. and Mrs. Smith (2005), in which Dargis writes that his previous films “move to the quicksilver rhythms of Gen A.D.D. With their flicker editing, narrative drive and revved-up soundtracks, these are movies made for plugged-in, hard-wired audiences for whom multitasking isn’t a modern complaint but an objective fact. In other words, anyone weaned on MTV, Michael Bay, the Internet, PlayStation and commercial music. . . .” (B1). To her credit, Dargis here situates MTV and related films in some context, and she does not demonize contemporary youth culture. But the reader is still left thinking that this is an alien cohort with problematic tendencies, and the film culture of which they are a part is not what a serious, artistic, adult cinema should be.

The problems with these oppositions, and with the notion of cinematic medium specificity, are legion; just as it makes less sense in the contemporary, postmodern, mass- and multimedia environment to claim the cinema as its own pristine, artistic medium, it is increasingly wrongheaded to set up oppositions of art and adult culture versus crass youth culture product. Most significantly, even if one sets aside the inapt valuations that make up these oppositions, the realities both of contemporary film and media business practices and of contemporary audience behavior bear little resemblance to this schema. In the decades, even centuries, since cultural critics and gatekeepers first began to draw the lines between high culture, mass culture, and folk culture; between highbrow and lowbrow; between art and commerce; between adult culture and youth culture—while inevitably privileging one over the other—these divisions have blurred substantially. Markers along this postmodern cultural path include Pop Art, animated TV se-
ries like *The Simpsons*, rap music, “alternative” rock music, graphic novels, and big-budget “independent” literary film adaptations like the Miramax-Disney coproduction *Cold Mountain* (2003) (Bagdikan; Bennett; Wright; Biskind, Down; Stabile and Harrison).

Relatedly, there is an obvious bias toward mainstream, cinematic convention at work in the opposition critics set up between ideas, humanity, narrative, and coherence (good films) and distraction, chaos, superficiality, and meaninglessness (MTV aesthetics films). In other words, even if it were true that recent Hollywood films are very different from previous work (a highly questionable assertion), there is still no reason why coherence, narrative, and character development should be privileged over style, spectacle, and “superficial” cinematic “chaos”—unless, as I have argued is the case, critics are working with rigid assumptions about what Hollywood films can and should be. The fact that so many critics reject MTV aesthetics films for being dumb, formulaic, and commercial and at the same time reject them for straying from norms of coherence, story, and clear, discernible meaning—which could describe countless works of art, cinematic and otherwise—only points to further contradictions in the MTV aesthetics trope.

**Conclusion**

Given the substantial flaws that this interrogation of the MTV aesthetics trope has revealed, including its historical inaccuracy, its misguided adherence to medium specificity theory, and the timeworn and untenable oppositions embedded in it, what accounts for its staying power in American film criticism? As previously noted, there are some simple and straightforward explanations for this, such as the temptation to use shorthand when one does not necessarily have time or space for nuance and elaboration, or when one is perhaps even encouraged to shy away from complexity by editors and other gatekeepers concerned about alienating readers or audiences. But there are other, more interesting functions that the MTV aesthetics trope may serve for critics, most of which connect back to the erosion of medium specificity in the contemporary media environment and the blurred boundaries and hierarchies that go with such erosion.

Just as the accelerated erosion of cinematic medium specificity may have spurred a recent wave of Hollywood films attacking television and video, as filmmakers attempt to draw distinctions between themselves and their art on the one hand and these lowly transgressors on the other, professional film critics may be anxious about their status and relevance as authorities in an age of do-it-yourself Internet critics, media conglomeration, and “pre-sold and critic-proof” films (Calavita 135–49). Using the MTV aesthetics trope can help critics assert what one does and does not stand for, and in the process define and protect their identity and professional turf. This is by no means a new phenomenon, as journalistic and academic critics dating back to the silent era have had to defend the artistic worthiness of film and the value of film criticism. But the confluence of recent developments on several fronts discussed in this article—economic, technological, demographic, and aesthetic—have turned on their heads the rigid distinctions between art and commerce and high and low that once put film critics and aficionados on the defensive about the lack of respect given to the objects of their affection; now the ostensible problem is a creeping relativism engendered by a bottom-line ethos, MTV, and a wired, short-attention-span-suffering generation of moviegoers (Haberski). Again, this is not to say that MTV-era films like *Staying Alive*, *Days of Thunder*, and *Cradle 2 the Grave* are being shortchanged by reviewers blind to their artistry. But one nevertheless gets the feeling that some contemporary critics have put themselves in an uncomprehending and defensive posture not completely different from the one adopted by the old guard of the 1960s when confronted by a changing landscape (Bosley Crowther’s disgust with *Bonnie and Clyde* being the most famous example)
(Haberski 175–78). And one is left with the paradox of critics who want to set themselves and their preferred films apart from the juvenile, taste-challenged masses, but who often try to do so within a mainstream, corporate system, and according to the rules of good cinema from an imagined, Edenic past—before things got so fast and loud.

NOTES

1. To his credit, Dixon does cite some cinematic harbingers of MTV aesthetics.

2. Nor am I interested in defending MTV itself, which can and should be taken to task for a variety of faults. See Jhally; Banks.

3. See Wright; King and Krzywinska.

4. There is a history of music videos that predates MTV, on The Monkees, Don Kirshner’s Rock Concert, and elsewhere, but these early videos tended to be “performance clips” rather than the concept and narrative videos that came later and are said to have affected filmmaking practices most. Early videos also tended to be rather cheap and simply made. See Reiss and Feineman 13–9; Goodwin 29–38; Mundy 179–220.

5. Akira Kurosawa is also cited frequently as an influence, on Lucas and Peckinpah in particular. See Prince, Savage 51–62; Pollock 46.

6. Many directors working outside the US during this time also portrayed these qualities and influences (and others), including Seijun Suzuki (Branded to Kill [1967]), Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammell (Performance [1970]), Dario Argento (Suspiria [1977]), and Jean-Jacques Beineix (Diva [1981]).

7. As part of their conspicuous exercises in style and technique, these films also exhibited some of the other postmodern tendencies associated with both the European New Wave and MTV, including intertextuality and homage. On the postmodernism of these films, see Ray 247–95; Kolker. On postmodernism and MTV, see Goodwin.

8. Some of the international filmmakers whose stylized and “showy” work since the early 1980s has influenced American filmmakers—and who have of course been influenced by American filmmakers (and others) themselves—include Luc Besson (La Femme Nikita [1990]), Danny Boyle (Trainspotting [1996]), Tom Tykwer (Run Lola Run [1998]), Guy Ritchie (Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels, [1998]), and a host of Japanese directors, including Hideo Nakata (Ringu [1998]) and Takashi Miike (Ichi the Killer [2001]).

9. See Kagan. Robert Richardson, the cinematographer on JFK, Natural Born Killers, and Nixon (1995) has clearly been an important force in shaping Stone’s films as well. Richardson won an Oscar for JFK, as did editors Joe Hutshing and Pietro Scalia, perhaps signaling that such aggressively stylized work—and the technologies that facilitate it—should be embraced.

10. Raiders, which hit theaters a few months before MTV began, was criticized in certain circles for some of the same faults later attributed to MTV aesthetics films. Pauline Kael, for instance, begins her New Yorker review by observing that “The marketing executives are the new high priests of the movie business,” and goes on to write that Raiders is representative of “the whole collapsing industry.” As part of its frenzy to engage the audience it features a “pounding score” and it “gets your heart pumping. But there’s no exhilaration in this dumb, motor excitement. . . . You can almost feel Lucas and Spielberg whipping the editor to clip things sharper—to move ahead. . . . Seeing [it] is like being put through a Cuisinart.” (207–12).

11. Of course, if one were to look at music videos themselves as TV commercials there would be much less separation between these two phenomena.

12. Schrader cites the additional influence of Bertolucci’s The Conformist (1970) and its production designer, Fernando Scarfiotti, whom Schrader hired to work on American Gigolo. Schrader also claims that The Conformist influenced his friends and contemporaries, like Michael Mann, whom Schrader says based the look of Miami Vice on Scarfiotti’s work on several films. Despite this, and despite the fact that Mann’s show had much in common with Thief (1981), Miami Vice is often described, reductively, as an MTV-type show (in part because an NBC executive supposedly conceived it as “MTV Cops”).

13. For an eclectic accounting of influences dating back to the 1930s, see Ehrenstein “Pre-MTV.”

14. One could argue that coherence, narrative, and character development continue to be privileged over other characteristics because Aristotle’s Poetics established them as the norms of drama thousands of years ago. While true, this does not fully explain the dogged resistance to change among a range of contemporary film critics.

15. And yet, to be sure, this does not mean that these supposed MTV aesthetics films are somehow more likely to be artistically worthwhile.

16. On contemporary film critics, see “Film Criticism” 27–45.

17. The critic who best fits this description now is the New Yorker’s David Denby, whose paeans to Steven Spielberg’s Saving Private Ryan (1998) and Clint Eastwood’s Mystic River (2003) and Million Dollar Baby (2004) can be contrasted with his dismissive reviews of Fight Club (1999), Kill Bill (2003), and David O. Russell’s Three Kings (1999) and I Heart Huckabees (2004).

REFERENCES


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