iText 1: Music Is Killing Home Taping

iTexts 1 to 6 are a compilation of related texts accompanying the exhibition iPod Killed the Videostar

In 1979, The Buggle's track "Video Killed The Radio Star" took the world by storm. Prophetically, their song foresaw the advent of a form of fame in which the pop video would be everything. All other media would be surpassed. As if to bludgeon home the point, it was the first song/video broadcast by MTV when it first went on air in 1981.

But frankly, apart from those with an interest in pop music extensive enough to realise that one member of the The Buggles was Trevor Horn, later a mega-producer, how many members of the great unwashed public can actually remember any other track by The Buggles?

If, as the song hypothesised, the older media would die at the hands of the new, its prophecy was not entirely accurate. Video did not wipe out radio. It certainly may have changed radio, but the predictions of extinction did not quite come to pass.

Anthropological archaeologists offer a model in which early Humankind existed alongside other early primate species for aeons before they eventually died out or were possibly wiped out by early humans. In much the same way, the advent of video did not kill radio, did not kill vinyl, did not kill tape cassettes. It may have altered their consumption, some still existing as exotic birds, others pretty much extinct. R.I.P. the 8- track .

In much the same way, the craze for the new generation of handheld and convergence technologies has altered our consumption of what already existed. But it has not completely overtaken and eradicated in the ways that advocates of the new forms sometimes seem to believe or insist will occur with immediate effect. We may buy music online, but we still like record shops or burn our digital tracks onto CD. Certainly they may have a different social meaning, but we have not allowed the option of the live shopping experience to disappear, despite the wishes of multi-national corporations.

Supply of new products is manipulated to try and force us to purchase in a way that suits big business, but there is still a notion of resistance: you want me to only be able to buy a Kylie track online? Fuck you, I'll get into second-hand vinyl collecting instead. Or copy it from my friend. Or even buy it from a very expensive shop if that's what it takes.

The Pop Video Era of the 1980's is distinctive, the first time in which music and moving image moved to a more composite position in how mass audiences envisaged 'the pop star'. And, perhaps it's over. With theoretically so many options and modes of consumption, the current mass audience does not charge home to see the latest video offering by their favourite performer as it did in the 1980's. There is a sense in which music and image have once again the option of existing separately, that the pop video has - for the large production companies at least- become something of a required and potentially lucrative total product controlled by the firm. It has become PR, marketing, another earner.

The shift is a significant one. For, in the 1980s, there was a period in which the audience did not believe this of video. Somehow we saw it as a reasonably personal expression by the performer. We agreed to be seduced by the personas of fame on offer. Now we view them with the rather jaundiced view of a mass audience that understands how video marketing works.

The re-separation of the media is anecdotally evident. Despite the convergence of the technologies, how many people choose to use their new generation of Ipods to watch video? Yes, the capability is there, but whereas the culture of music-on-the-move is deeply ingrained (judging by the number of people one sees with white cords hanging out of their ears) that of portable video is not. Perhaps it is the shape of things to come. But if it is, it's not here yet.

The tendency of enthusiasts of any new technology to exaggerate its immediate impact and foreshorten history is well documented. For example, would the Ipod have been anywhere as successful so quickly if the Walkman had not existed as a precursor? Ipod did not beget headphones.

Historically, the culture for portable music has been with us for a long time. Even today there are Ipod enthusiasts who can remember a time when the word 'tranny' was commonly understood to mean a small portable radio and not something altogether different.

But, somehow, the Walkman moved things into a new realm. Regardless of the reasons, we were all eager to shimmy into our silk jogging shorts and John McEnroe headbands and go out on the street, conspicuously consuming music. We only ever took up jogging so that we could prove that we had one of the high-status 'anti roll mechanism' models of Walkman or its inevitable copies.

The public immersion in a private world of sound is what links the Walkman and the Ipod. If a culture of portable, private images is being nurtured, it's not quite fully fledged: people do simply not use their new generation of personal stereos in this way in any great numbers.

This does not mean that absence of subcultures in which the public immersion in private visual and audio worlds are established. On the contrary, gaming culture's development of handheld devices has a strong pedigree. Enthusiasts, often inaccurately relegated to the fringes of mass media consumption, have a long history of zoning out in a world of interactive visuals and sound.

Perhaps this is most telling. Perhaps the residual problems shaping a lack of a current handheld video world, the reasons that the Ipod has not yet shifted us that one step closer to surfing alternate realities, Matrix style, is because it is the last dinosaur, not the new generation,

The marketing and iconography surrounding the Ipod and its copies presents machines of now, the cutting edge in personal digital technology. It has proven very successful commercially. Perhaps, because it speaks to an older generation who, if not in terms of age, in terms of conceptual thinking, expect a reality in which the device itself is king.

There is a different reality in the digital age. Something that the gaming kids and computer geeks grasped a long time ago is that convergence is about activity options, not device. The tiny digital technologies and soft technologies of software that power these new options are not, as with the Walkman, limited to a single device. Sassy kids with high-end portable gaming handsets have merely bought a set of headphones and a connector device to their computer, not an Ipod. Housewives with a bit of technological sense have figured out that plugging the DVD-player into the amplifier has circumvented the need to buy a new hi-fi

In these terms, the Ipod represents a residual fetishistic belief that the device, the material amulet, is both responsible for specific magic power contained within it and the ability to convey that the owner possesses that ability to others.

The work of the Netherlands-based American artist and designer, Christie Wright taps into this mindset. The work is almost in opposition to the demands of the sector in which she previsously worked; industrial design. Her works present us with devices that offer the activities of the digital age - a mobile phone calls, for example- in a form that repositions our expectations. Here, there are no sleek objects that tap into what we have come to expect from 'futuristic technology'. Instead, we are offered decorative ceramic objects that could be jewellery, could be miniture sculpture, could be ritualistic objects. Of course, what the work highlights is that all of our 'futuristic devices' are these things already. We just don't recognise them as such. We place technology in another box.

Despite the constant reminders that its latest versions of Ipod and its friends can be used as a video-viewing device, it somehow psychologically connects with its predecessor, the Walkman. If we are going to find a way to integrate the culture of the Pop Video Era into our handheld, there does not appear to be any clear route mapped out as yet.

Similarly, the teachings of those faceless corporate entities that tell us what to believe about this new generation of voodoo machines appear to suffer from an anxious conflict. On one hand they seem eager to let us know that we are in control, that if we put it together with a range of other new technologies, we could become creators, make our own music and video. Yet on the other hand, they seem very concerned that these very capabilities on offer will enable us to steal from them, to replicate, share and

copy their pre-made products without paying the due price.

Again, nothing new. Certainly, the potential for the products that can now be made DIY-style are far more sophisticated and have been heavily influenced by the lessons of the Pop Video Era. But the overlap of two technologies, one largely controlled by the industry, the other allowing the user to be far more active in defining how it's used, is a repetition.

Endless debates, threats, arguments and court cases raged throughout the 1970's and 1980's as to the ability of music companies to prevent hi-fi manufacturers from making machines that 'encouraged' owners copying their vinyl onto tape cassettes. Uneasy compromises emerged. We could only legally copy our own legally purchased vinyl for our personal use. Yeah, right.

The Walkman itself was a problem. It encouraged home taping. Counter arguments were offered: pre-recorded cassette distribution would be increased and alternative sales income generated that way. In some cases, the increasingly multi-national character of the players only seemed to heighten the confusion. Where did one's loyalties lie as a corporation that both manufactured hi-fi equipment and managed music labels?

Ultimately, the outlook seemed good as long as one was a large company. Despite the official press releases and statements, consumption appeared to breed consumption. The markets did not stop growing. Perhaps if they had, the scenario of struggling for Global centralised control over the pop music industry would not have become such a prevalent mass cultural image of the music label giants.

The debates and legal actions about intellectual property rage contemporaneous to the constant marketing of new devices and their abilities for interactivity, to allow us to create our own products. If we hadn't already gone through a similar paradox, perhaps we would be confused.

Ultimately, this is only a background to one of the most interesting aspects of the current state of play. Given that the predicted Handheld Video Era has not truly arrived yet - perhaps it never will- what have the creatives been up to with the new generation of technologies?

Like hairy Neanderthals whacking ancient chimps with rocks, they have been doing new and contemporary things but there is still a whiff of the Pop Video Era lingering in the air

Eddie van der Velden's recent work, "Bo Dancing" underlines the conflagration. On one level it comes over as a pop video: the sinewy movements of the dancer, her iconic Ipod headphones wedged firmly in her ears, as she shimmies and shakes her way through various landscapes in time to the beat. If she were singing, we would readily accept her as a pop star; the work as a pop video. Even without singing, we might readily accept the work as a pop video for a dance band if it came in a box giving that information. But it is neither. It is a moving image portrait of a private individual. The inclusion of her dance movements relates to a practice of drawing on personal interests in an age-old tradition of portraiture. The drive to capture the essential qualities of a person, almost classical in approach, has been transferred from a static medium to one that moves.

"Bo Dancing" is not what is first seems. It is not a pop video. But we would not be stupid for wondering.

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