

“So empty without me”

Intermediality, intertextuality and non-musical factors in the evaluation of pop music: The (not so) strange case of MTV and Eminem

Intermédialité, intertextualité et facteurs non musicaux dans l'évaluation de la pop : le cas (pas si) étrange de MTV et d'Eminem

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So empty without me

**Intermediality, intertextuality and non-musical factors
in the evaluation of pop music: The (not so) strange case of MTV and Eminem**

by

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Abstract. This paper deals with the role of media in diffusing music, focusing particularly on music videos and Eminem's *Without Me*. It will try to demonstrate that, with the ever growing role of media in imposing artists characterized by a good look or ability to impose their figure through controversies, we can say that music is no longer evaluated or judged by following "traditional" critical terms that rely on music itself. The aesthetic concerns of pop music texts now focus mainly on the co-textual, para-textual and external elements of the song, that appear with all their impact force especially in music videos such as *Without Me*.

This essay is divided in four parts. In the first, the essay will attempt to define what "pop music" is. This term must not to be considered as a synonym for "popular music", but as a specific branch in this field. Pop music is an intermedial and intertextual phenomenon defined by its position in the contemporary mediascape.

The second part briefly outlines the six nodes that create a web through which pop music is diffused: the recorded song, the performance, the musical press, radio, traditional visual media, and new media.

Thirdly, there will be a discussion about how the media evaluate pop music in non-musical terms, focusing particularly on music videos, MTV and video music channels.

In the last part, a particular text is considered (Eminem's music video *Without me*) to show that, no matter how good or bad, in visual media image and performance prevail over music.

Keyword. *Popular Music — Music Videos — MTV — Eminem*

« They tried to shut me down on MTV,
but it feels so empty without me »

(Eminem, *Without Me*)

When trying to define the contemporary music we listen to everyday—through radio broadcasts, music videos, songs on our stereo or as mood music while we are in a public place—many questions arise.

“Pop music” is “popular”. As pointed out by many researchers,¹ this definition comes from the fact that it is widely appreciated by a large number of people. But how does music reach these people? Certainly, this occurs through the commercial distribution of a record, but music reaches its audience mainly through the mass media.²

Yet, if we think about the role of media in diffusing music, there is another question to answer: what kind of music do the mass media try to promote? In other words, do mass media think in term of “good music” and “bad music”?

Mass media, especially radio and TV, judge music as being “appropriate” and “effective” if it reaches their commercial target. Moreover, mass media devote their space to songs and performers whose main credit lies in having an *appealing* face or look, an *exciting* way of dancing, a *catchy* song with a *catchy* chorus, an *impressive* music video, some *intriguing* rumours about their so-called “private life”.

Pop music is not judged in strictly musical terms. The aesthetic concerns of pop music texts focus on the co-textual, para-textual and external elements of the song.

Four steps will be followed in order to find the answers to these questions.

During the first step I will attempt to define what “pop music” is. This term must not to be considered as a synonym for “popular music”, but as a specific branch in this field. Pop music is an intermedial and intertextual phenomenon defined by its position in the contemporary mediascape.

1. See the work of Philip Tagg (2003 with Bob Clarida), and Richard Middleton (1994).

2. An example of this is the quantitative research conducted in Italy by ISTAT—the national statistics institute—points out that music is listened to on the radio by 79% of listeners, and through TV by 66,9% of people. Intentional fruition through cassettes (57,3%), CDs (30,3 %) and records (22,8 %) is largely secondary. ISTAT, (1999).

The second step briefly outlines the six nodes that create a web through which pop music is diffused: the recorded song, the performance, the musical press, radio, traditional visual media, and new media.

Thirdly, I will discuss how the media evaluate pop music in non-musical terms by focusing on music videos, and particularly on MTV and video music channels. I will examine the co-textual, para-textual and narrative elements determining the criteria of selection in the so-called “rotation” in which the performance prevails over the musical and lyrical content of the song (especially the look and the visual body appeal along with the style of dancing).

Fourth, a particular text is considered (Eminem’s music video *Without me*) to show that, no matter how good or bad, in visual media image and performance prevail over music.

“Pop” vs. “Popular music”

Pop is everywhere. It crawls silently in every space of our everyday life, becoming an obsessive background noise to our activities. Pop music is a “muzak”³ that ticks the rhythms of social time which the mass media impose upon us all.⁴ Yet, pop music’s most irrelevant details are mostly talked about and discussed, such as gossip and rumours related to its “stars”, the musicians.

This is partially due to the difficulty in coping with the words that describe the fields of “rock”, “popular”, and “pop” music correctly.

In Italy, the term “light music”, “musica leggera”, commonly has the same semantic meaning used to identify the same area of music as that covered by “popular music”.⁵ This definition clearly refers to Adorno’s ideological and destructive criticisms and furthermore shows the general attitude

3. According to Roy Shuker, “muzak” is a term applied “rather negatively to ‘functional’ or ‘background music’. (...) It is used in a deliberate attempt to influence or manipulate the buying patterns of supermarket shoppers, the eating habits of restaurant patrons, and so on. Muzak is also used as background music in places such airport lounges, doctors’ waiting rooms and lifts (elevator music) to soothe the mood of people in such public spaces”. Roy Shuker, (1998: 210).

4. For example, see Cardini & Bolla (1997).

5. See the aforementioned research (ISTAT, *La musica in Italia*), for example. As for the Italian use of the term “Popular music”, it remains untranslated in its English form when referred to by academic theory: see Fabbri (2002).

towards this kind of music: it is “light”; that is to say, it must not be “good” or “bad” since its main function is to be entertaining.

Like “popular music”, this term denotes a very large field. “Popular music” is used, especially in academic studies, to indicate a kind of music that, in productive, social and historical terms, is different from classical, contemporary and jazz music.⁶

“Pop music” is different from “popular music”. The first term refers to a specific branch of popular music, encompassing all the musical genres of the popular song that have emerged since the rise of rock’n’roll in the 1950s. Moreover, pop music has largely used mass media to promote itself and its stars, the musicians, in order to impose itself in the listener’s mind and ears.

To sum up, pop music is defined by:

a) The historical/productive period. Pop music was born in the ‘50s with rock’n’roll. The development of successive forms of popular music has occurred through the increasing strength, and so rising role, of the recording industry through the latter filtering its differing styles through commercial criteria;

b) Intermedial diffusion. Pop music is spread over two main areas: commercial distribution of phonographic recordings, and simultaneous transmission through various media;

c) Textual form. Pop music is composed of songs. These are the communicative units of pop music. Pop is diffused through typologies of texts that are re-elaborations of the song itself: performances, music videos, multimedia texts, etc. All of them share certain elements: linguistic features which either stem from the song (such as the narrative structure) or from the context (the language of the medium on which the text appears);

d) Identity construction. Pop music has developed a new form of authorship in popular music: the interpreter/performer becomes more important than both the song and the music. Musicians become stars who build their identity in a narrative and intermedial manner. They tell their own story of public personae by using not only the lyrics, but also performance and presence on different media.

6. As it has been pointed out, the “brief century of popular music” began in the ‘20s with the first regular radio broadcast in the States and with the American market passing the 100 million mark of record copies sold (Jason Toynbee, 2000). For a discussion of the term “Popular music”, cf. my work (Sibilla, 2003). See also Middleton (1994).

“Pop” music and the media system

So, pop music is mainly defined by its symbiotic relationship with mass media. Nowadays, it can be said that pop music is *mostly produced* for media broadcasting; this point is crucial to the development of the hypothesis of this article, as media impose their methods of evaluation on the industry producing pop.

This is not only a productive factor, but a linguistic one too: pop music modifies its musical and narrative language according to the different contexts in which it appears.

Like a chameleon that changes its colors according to the terrain upon which it stands, pop songs can change their meaning according to differing communicative contexts. That is, pop songs are able to negotiate their meaning with various existing individual communicative contexts.

Pop music can therefore be thought of as a media system (fig. 1), a web, mainly composed of six nodes, every one of which is related to the other nodes in the web. Each node is a trampoline from which the pop message takes off. This pop media system can be visualized diagrammatically as follows:

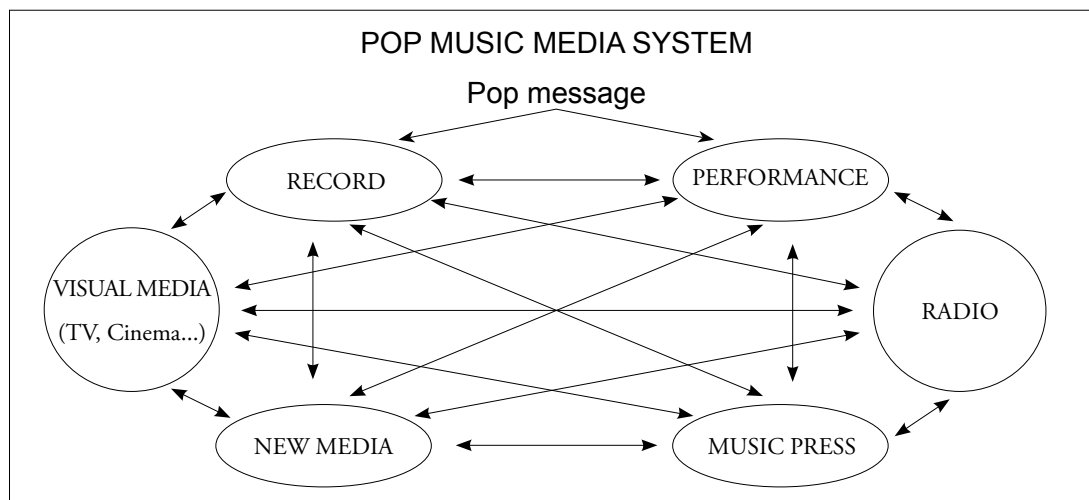


fig. 1. – Pop music as media system: each of the six nodes is related with every other node. For example, a song becomes a performance, gets reviewed on the press, is broadcasted on radio, TV... But also a performance for radio or TV becomes a record, and so on.

This diagram represents the modes enabling the pop message's diffusion. Starting from recordings and performance of the record, the message of pop spreads through a media web, which is composed of radio, visual communication, new media and the music press. Each node of this web:

- a) creates one or more specific typologies of pop music text;
- b) creates a particular language, which is derived from the contamination between musical language and the medium language;
- c) Contributes to the building of a wider narrative, whose "star" is the artist-performer.

The first of these nodes is the pop song as a *record*. The song is a communicative product diffused by a phonographic recording through which different languages are conveyed: verbal/narrative, musical, interpretative. That is, a song is made of words (the lyrics), of music (melody, harmony, rhythm) and of a voice that unifies these elements by interpreting them. All these elements are fixed and crystallize on a record produced by an industry, which is then sold through commercial channels.⁷

The second node of the pop media system is the *performance*, intended both as a "live" execution of a song in front of an audience—the "traditional" concert—and as an execution of a song for media: TV and radio performances, music videos, webcasts, and so on. The public performance of a pop song is a dramatization requiring and magnifying the presence of the "artist", who is both a narrator—the voice that is telling a tale—and a character—the character of the tale (Frith 1996). Since they are existing media, the following four nodes are the most specific ones: press, radio, audiovisual and new media.

Through the *music press*—the third node of this system—the pop song is translated into verbal language. The role of the music press in establishing pop music as a culture has already been pointed out (Frith, 1978), but particularly in non specialized media such as newspapers or magazines, this process has frequently underlined non musical elements of pop, such as gossip, controversy, and so on.

The fourth place is *radio*. Pop music shares its primary element, that of sound, with this medium. But in radio, a pop song is transformed by the flow of different sounds: words, jingles, noises.

The pop song is even further transformed by the fifth node: *image and audiovisual media*. This place is certainly the most composite, as it includes different means of communication: music can

7. See Simon Frith (1996) for the role of narrative and interpretation in the pop song. Cf. Also Albin Zak J. III (2001), whose hypothesis is that the recorded song is a product of a "studio poetic".

be absent, as in the still images of iconography—photos, record covers—or directly present in movies, TV, music videos. As will be seen, music videos and MTV have established several large changes in the way music reaches fruition: the pop song clashes with audiovisual and TV language since the latter emphasize non-musical elements such as visual appearance, global look, style of dancing.⁸

The last node in the diffusion of pop is represented by new media, that is to say, computer-mediated ways of accessing and listening to music. Here pop music is translated into digital language: it becomes part of multimedial and interactive texts in CD-Roms, DVDs, and websites. Texts that mix different forms of expression in one space provide the user with the option of choosing his own path by dialoguing with the text. With new media, pop music also modifies its distribution channels and distribution processes: it becomes immaterial, a “file” that can be shared and exchanged through digital networks.

This media system, responsible for the diffusion of the pop message, can be viewed as a *narrative process*: the musician is narrator telling his own tale through his actions, his interpretations of songs in records, in performances, and on different media.

This narrative process works on six different levels. Each musical text is, on its own, part of an intertextual web of narrative meanings which relate one to another. A pop music text, in this perspective, defines its meaning through its placement in a medial situation at the following levels:

- a) *Contextual level*: the specific context in which a particular pop music text is placed;
- b) *Textual level*: the narrative characteristics of the specific language of the musical medium itself (musical, verbal, audiovisual, etc.);
- c) *Paratextual level*: the way a pop music text acts or is intended to be a complement to other related music texts (*i.e.* a music video to a song, or a printed advertisement and/or record cover to a record);
- d) *Intertextual level*: the relation of the text with other texts belonging to the same or to different media (*i.e.* songs or music videos of the same artist, texts of the same musical genre, etc);
- e) *Intermedial level*: the life of a single text through different medias (*i.e.* a song or a performance reviewed in the press, broadcast through radio, TV and/or over the Internet);
- f) *Macro narrative level*. The contribution of a single text to the telling of its author’s story (for

8. For a reading of music videos and for a reconstruction of the academic debate on MTV, see Gianni Sibilla (1999).

example, how a musical video defines the narrative of its performer, a narrative which is also built through albums, performances, etc).

In other words, each pop music text (a record, a performance, a music video...) creates a narrative by:

- a) placing the musicians' action in a context;
- b) telling it through the languages of a text;
- c) surrounding it with a paratext;
- d) framing it in series of intertextual relationships with other texts;
- e) diffusing it on different medias;
- f) and by making it a contribution to a wider narrative, namely, that of a musician's career.

Since every node is part of a narrative web, is it not now possible to re-read the preceding diagram as a narrative process (fig. 2). In every node a narrative action can take place (the production of a text) to be read on each of these six levels. Additionally, every narrative action of a musician is framed in a macro narrative—that of his personal story as an artist.

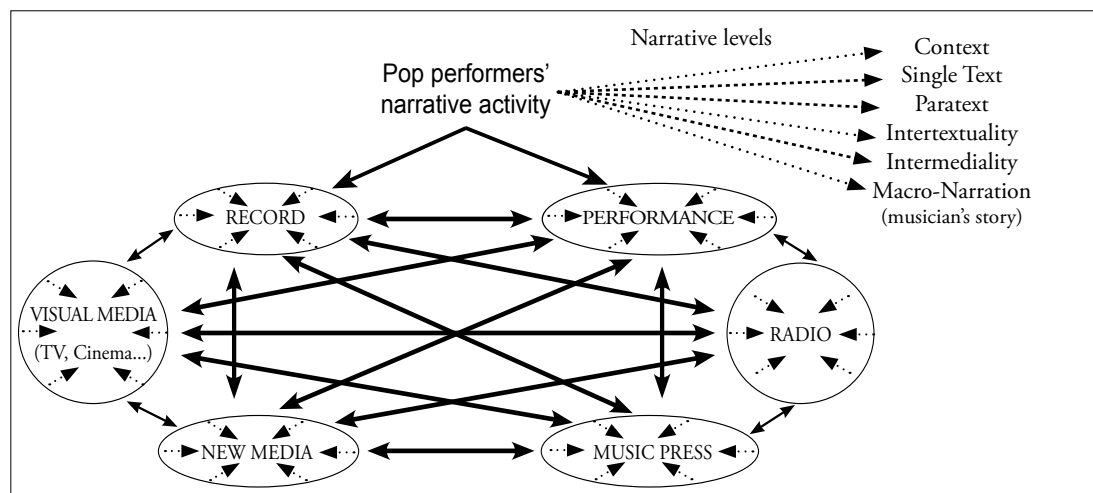


fig. 2 – Pop music media system as a narrative process: the narrative levels (dotted arrows) act on every text of pop music diffused in the nodes of this web.

Evaluating music or evaluating performance?

How music videos and MTV changed the parameters of pop

This double coding of pop messages—through different media and through differing degrees of narrative significance—creates a particular situation. Music—whether good or bad—is just one of the least important elements which are considered by the media when they choose which artist and song they are going to broadcast.

Pop is made of texts which are themselves made of music—songs; but these texts are transformed by the media through which they appear. These media have their own languages, so they stress non-musical elements as these are more appealing to the standards they operate.

One of the defining traits of pop music is the *role of performance*: the interpreter is more important than the song itself. That is because mass media *need* faces and *need* stories and characters in order to use music in the same way as any other type of entertainment.

So, *acting* a song for the benefit of a mass medium involves a series of non musical elements and these overshadow the song itself. Pop performance is a *mise en scène* where the interpreter's body takes the stage and “plays”: he plays a song, but most of all he “plays” a role, narrating his personal story.

According to Simon Frith, “if all songs are narratives, if they work as mini-musicals, then their plots are a matter of interpretation both by performers attaching them to their own star stories *and* by listeners, putting ourselves in the picture” (Frith, 1996: 211). Furthermore, Frith points out that this creates the effect that, by watching a musical performance on a mass media: “We don't take the musicians to be interpreting the song; rather, our response is to interpret the musicians” (Frith, 1996: 225).

When performed publicly, pop music is re-designed in order to communicate something more than, and different from, that intended in the original meaning of the recording of a song. A pop performance involves at least two languages other than music: these are dramaturgy (scenography, *mise en scène*) and non-verbal communication (body presentation, gestures, dance). Through the use of the two last mentioned non-musical languages, performance builds a symbolic universe within which performers are placed, where they “play” and tell a story.

The dramaturgy of a pop performance defines its spatial, temporal and rhetorical codes. In other words, through these codes, the performance defines itself as a text in three ways: firstly by

choosing a space and a time sequence for action; secondly, in the way it presents itself; and thirdly in the way all these elements are homogeneously combined.⁹

Non-verbal language defines performance as a *body tale*, where communicative exchange and narration are controlled by the physical presence of a body and by the gestures made by that body. In pop performance, the body of the performer is used as a text to which different typologies of meanings are attached: visual presentation of the body itself: the look; movements as signs: and gestures and dancing.¹⁰

As Frith points out, “the musicians body is also an instrument (...). To read body movements, to interpret them, is always to put them in a story” (Frith, 1996: 219).

In short, performance is a narration: of a song, of its performer, of its public life. This is the main reason why the mass media are obsessed by the non-musical elements of pop: they need to attach stories to songs and to the performers, so they focus on controversial and paratextual elements. The look, the ability to dance and to move, the ability to say something “interesting” in an “interesting” way (different, shocking, controversial), possibly with some background music.

From the first music videos in the second half of the ‘70s to the “explosion” of MTV in the ‘80s, all these aspects of pop music communication have become particularly evident since the success of TV music (cf. Sibilla, 1999: 175-188; Goodwin, 1992).

Video killed the radio star: this was the significant title of the first song broadcast by MTV on August 1st, 1981. This song title is something more than a slogan: MTV imposed different ways of evaluating pop music which created “visual” stars. A music video can write (or re-write) the story of an artist in three minutes in a much more effective way than a thousand radio broadcasts of a song. This is effected by using images that leave almost nothing to the imagination, by showcasing the artist’s skills in dancing, moving, and in having a “cool” look. And, yes, in being a good musician.

Music videos themselves are the results of three factors: industry’s promotional needs, pop music’s visual culture, and TV language (Sibilla, 2003: 274-279). The first factor means that music videos are a tool used to promote and impose a product, a sort of commercial for a song and an artist:

9. For a semiotic analysis of the language of dramaturgy, cf. Elam (1980) and De Marinis (1982). For a complete reading of the dramaturgy of pop, on which this paragraph is based, see Sibilla (2003: 181-188).

10. For an analysis of the role of body communication in musical subcultures, see Hebdige (1979). For an history of look in pop music, see Paul Gorman (2001).

they have to make what they try to sell to an audience look “cool”. The second factor means that visually music videos largely draw from the iconography created by pop music through other media, whether from record covers or magazines, or from movies or TV appearances. The third factor means that music videos are TV texts mixing all these elements through the use of TV language: a fast, often schizophrenic flow of images and sounds inserted within a larger flow of other texts: commercials, presentations, and so on.¹¹

MTV, and all the video music channels that have emulated its format, have taken these ideas to limits of their extremes. MTV is television *made of* music videos, and *made as a* music video.¹²

This perspective means that MTV has obviously put greater and greater stress on the visual aspects of pop music. A good video on MTV is often a crucial point in the commercial success of an artist. And, in many cases, record companies have spent much more money on producing spectacular videos than was actually spent to produce the records. In three or four minutes a video can sum up the marketing work that must take weeks through radio, press, media and live performances. In other words, record industries know very well that 1) artists must be “cool” to sell records: they must have non-musical skills; 2) the best way to impose the “coolness” of an artist is to have a cool video that goes on “heavy rotation” (that is, the maximum possible number of showings per day) on MTV.

From its point of view, MTV has developed programming strategies which are partly drawn from radio, and are partly typically televisual. MTV uses a software program called “Selector” to determine the “rotation” of a video during each day and each week. This software, the same as that used by format radios, controls how many times and in which part of the day a video is shown. These are chosen and pitched by using a pre-comprehension strategy (“This artist fits on MTV”), and qualitative and quantitative audience research carried out to understand how much a video and an artist are effectively noticed and appreciated by a representative sample of people.

11. See Raymond Williams (1974) for the first definition of the idea of a TV “flow”.

12. As pointed out by many researchers, MTV began its first years of broadcast offering what some called a “postmodern” version of TV flow - images and sound without a centre. Then, subsequently, its broadcast became something more than a pure sequence of videos, jingles and presentation by VJs. Its programming became more structured and thematic, but with videos still playing a predominant part. See Ann Kaplan (1988) for a postmodern reading of MTV. For a criticism of this reading, see Andrew Goodwin, “Fatal Distractions. MTV meets postmodern culture”, in Frith, Goodwin, Grossberg (1993).

The pre-comprehension strategy of MTV, largely based on non-musical parameters, has been widely debated through the years, creating quite a lot of controversy on many occasions. Jack Banks, in his detailed account of what he calls the “anticompetitive practices of MTV”, says that the music video channels “strongly embrace a ‘narrowcast’ format playing only specific kinds of music designed to attract its desired young audience” (Banks, 1996: 176).

In addition, Banks reports that music videos must reach certain technical standards, and must exclude certain direct references in its choice of words and images: explicit sex, extreme violence, and commercial brand showing.¹³ MTV’s broadcasting parameters and programming strategies often include implicit pressure on record labels and artists to edit and modify their songs and videos in order to make them fit MTV.

Certainly, these strategies and practices marked MTV’s growth, but have also changed through the years. However, one thing remains unquestioned: in two decades of existence, MTV has set a way of evaluating pop music largely based on image more than music: “Pop videos, in short, foreground performance as seduction, and forestall performance as embarrassment. If nothing else (and this relates to the long history of music photography, framing the musician as pinup as well as a music star), video is now a key component in understanding of music as erotic” (Frith, 1996: 225).

Media programming feels so empty *Without Me*: Eminem’s music video

In order to provide a specific example of the intertextuality and of most relevant non musical factors in producing pop texts for mass media, Eminem’s music video *Without Me* has been chosen as an illustration.

To underline how Eminem and this particular text are much more, and mostly, about performance, images and controversy than about music, the aforementioned analysis schema will be used. Moving from contextual, textual, paratextual, and intertextual elements to the intermedial and narrative attitude of the text, I will explain what kind of meaning is built into this video, and which fruition path the text suggests to its spectators.

13. See, for example, the table of rejected videos reported by Banks (1996: 181).

Contextual elements

In the last few years Eminem has become one of pop's most popular, debated and controversial icons. Since the release of *The Slim Shady LP* in 1999, and subsequent records *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000) and *The Eminem Show* (2002), this rapper from Detroit, Michigan, has sold several million records. But, most notably, he has built himself up into a public character by the large-scale use of mass media. He dubbed himself *Slim Shady*, singing and performing the events of his troubled private life in public: his mentally unstable and abusing mother, the violent relationship with his wife Kim, his "debates" with rival stars Christina Aguilera, Moby, Limp Bizkit... In doing so, he clearly blurred the division between reality and fiction, imposing an intermedial narration set in order to shock rather than make music worth listening to.

The *Without Me* video is one of the best examples of this attitude.

This song was released in spring 2002, and was intended as the opening single for the album *The Eminem Show*, released some weeks later in May 2002. In the same period, a music video was produced so that rotation could be obtained on TV. The video was directed by Joseph Kahn, and edited in four different formats: two for Europe and two for the United States and North America. Each continent was provided with a "general" version, and a different "MTV" edit which was specifically made for broadcast on the TV channel. These four edits are slightly different in some small details: mostly, they omit certain references. For instance, the word "MTV" is omitted in the lyric in UK general version.

Textual elements

This video has a simple storyline made complex by a great variety of other elements plotted into the narration. The main story sees a boy buying Eminem's record when his mother is not around. Dr. Dre, the rapper's mentor, calls his protégé while he is in bed with two women: they have to go and save the boy from listening to the record. Eminem dresses up in a Robin-like costume and becomes Slim Shady, alias "Rap boy". Together with Dre, he travels around the town and arrives just in time to stop the boy from playing the CD. This story, represented with comic-like style and features, is interspersed by performances of Eminem singing on a grey background and in a variety of other settings: in a hospital emergency room (which brings to mind the TV drama *E.R.*); in a

talk show dressed as his mother; in two reality shows similar to *Real World* and *Survivors*; giving an electroshock to a man; variously dressed as rival artist Moby, as an Elvis impersonator, as a wrestling fighter and, finally, as Osama Bin Laden speaking and dancing to a CNN-like channel. In other words, the narrative part of the video serves as a framework for the diverse performance sequences that compose the text itself. The video itself has a strong “concept” that holds all these material together:¹⁴ portraying Eminem as a controversy-maker, someone who’s able to say what he thinks, and therefore someone who is necessary in our hypocritical society. This concept is related to the chorus of the song: “It feels so empty without me”.

The most important parts of the video, though, are the performance sequences. The rapper is seen performing, singing and acting in eleven different settings. These settings are all related to a specific part of the lyrics. For example, the electroshock sequence takes place when Eminem raps about U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney, who is saying to his wife, Mrs Cheney, that his heart problems are very worrying indeed. Then Eminem is first seen as an Elvis impersonator when he says that he’s the “worst thing” since Presley. He dresses up like Moby when he defines his musical rival—who has overtly criticized Eminem’s homophobia on several occasions—as a “36-year-old bald headed fag”. All these sequences—with fast paced editing—more than anything else, draw the spectator’s attention to Eminem’s acting skills. The music and lyrics are simply an excuse to showcase his ability to say something shocking, in a shocking way, and in a shocking setting.

Paratextual and Intertextual level

At this point the manner in which music becomes a secondary element in this music video becomes evident. The original idea behind music videos is that they are paratext: they complement songs on a visual level, and they act as a commercial for a record. In this case, the music video becomes

14. The distinction between narrative, *conceptual* and *performance* music videos was introduced by Simon Frith. Narrative videos are those who focus on a story derived from the text of the song; conceptual videos are more loose association of images and sequences associated to the song; performance videos focus on the artist seen while he’s executing the song. As it has been noted, and as the Eminem video clearly shows, these three macro genres usually mix together to generate quite complex texts. See Frith (1988) and, for an analysis application of these representation genres, see Sibilla (1999).

more important than the song itself: Eminem is not only able to *tell* what he wants to say, but to *show* it. This happens in almost every video, but in Eminem's case this is particularly important. The lyrics of the song itself are rapped in a very fast manner and in some parts may be difficult to understand. The images of this video are more *evident*: they are able to portray situations, events and characters of the rapper's imagery in a much more effective way. Therefore, in this reversal of positions, the records almost becomes a paratext to the music video.

The video also draws much of its force on an intertextual level. The images themselves are full of implicit and explicit references to other videos of the rapper, such as the Robin-like dressing that was presented in several other clips. On the same intertextual level, Eminem also showcases his Zelig-like abilities by reworking material drawn from various, non musical sources. As already mentioned, a great part of the video imagery is drawn from comics. But Eminem is also able to put a TV Drama (*E.R.*) into his world, as well as reality TV (*The Real World*, a show made by MTV; the talk show; *Survivors*), pornography (the two women in his bed are porno actresses), American musical and popular culture (the Elvis impersonator), and current news (Osama Bin Laden on CNN and Dick Cheney)...

Intermedial and Macro narrative level

From this perspective, the video is the top third of an intermedial iceberg whose submerged body is represented by a variety of Eminem's performing activities. In the course of four minutes the video is used to sum up a series of messages to be found in the various other texts and media: from the recorded song to live concerts, from TV and radio appearances to the web. The video itself has the clear intention of creating controversy, and so is designed to be debated by the other media, such as newspapers and magazines.

Eminem's attitude can be fully understood if his video is read as a meta-narrative. *Without Me* is a representation of Eminem's public life.¹⁵ It is a first-person narration, a me-narration filled with what seem to be personal details: his friendship with Dr. Dre, his fights with his mother, his angry

15. Eminem is probably one of the smartest performers on the scene nowadays. The same narrative attitude focused on the representation of his personal life can be found in several other texts of his production, especially music videos. In *Stan* he depicted the story of a stalker obsessed with his success. In *Cleaning Out My Closet* he can be seen digging his grave to his much hated mother, and so on.

reply to public rivals, his endeavor to affirm himself as someone who is shocking because he says and does what he thinks; someone who is impossible to “shut down” because everyone needs him: otherwise everything would be “so empty” without him, as the song repetitively repeats. However, even though not everyone needs him, and not everyone’s life would be empty without him, the mass media certainly *do* need him, or otherwise there would be a great deal of space for them to fill with other stories.

Without me is a dramaturgical *mise en scène* of the rapper’s story in which music is an excuse for verbal and non verbal communication of performance. The latter is attached to the former; but the eleven different settings in which Eminem appears during only four minutes demonstrate that the look and the style of dancing are considered to be far more effective in spreading a message than the music (*cf.* fig. 3).

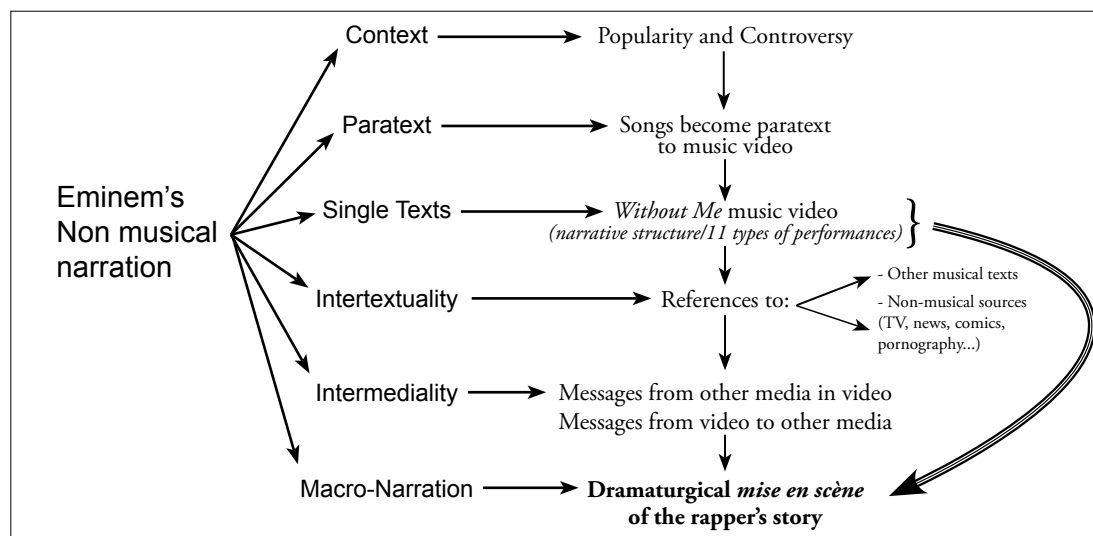


fig. 3 – Scheme of *Without Me*’s narrative process.

Conclusions: musicians exploiting media and musicians exploited by media

To sum up, by using images, performance and non-musical elements, the *Without Me* video defines Eminem's symbolic universe. As Frith would say, this video represents music as an erotic: Eminem plays with his character, and plays the role he is requested to play by mass media to seduce the listeners.

"I do say things that I think will shock people. But I don't do things to shock people", Eminem says in his biography posted on his official web site www.eminem.com. That, at least, is his view. This video, as with many other videos by Eminem, demonstrates the exact opposite: he wants to shock people, and he wants to use mass media to do it. He uses mass media, especially visual media, to tell his own version of his story. And mass media need him, but not necessarily his music. They need his face, his ability to shock by doing such things as eleven controversial performances in four minutes.

Eminem's video certainly reaches the technical standards requested by the medium: it has special effects, it is directed by a celebrated director, and it narrates a story in a 'cool' and impressive way. Moreover, the fact that his record company produced four edits of the video, two of which were cut solely for MTV, at the very least shows the desire to comply with some of the implicit pressures of this music channel, for the MTV edit omits small but controversial details.

MTV tries to shut Eminem down, as the song lyric says. But Eminem is willing to shock people anyway, even if this means a small amount of preventive auto-censorship.

What has been outlined concerning Eminem's video could easily be applied to many current performers who have built their celebrity status through visual media more than through music. Eminem is probably the most evident case of a performer who has exploited media just as media has exploited him. By incorporating his anger into every performance, he has been able to use his private life as the key factor in his success. Many other performers who do not possess this anger have used other factors in order to obtain space and become visible on mass media, factors such as handsome physical appearance, ability to dance, and so on.

In conclusion, it can be said that when using these criteria, we can say that music can no longer be evaluated by following "traditional" critical terms, for pop music can now only be evaluated by recognizing the fact that music is no longer the central core.

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