**Video Script**

**Lecture 34 – Cable**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

**[Plays Dire Straits “Money for Nothing” 0:44 to 1:43]** And with that dramatic introduction, welcome to today’s lecture all about cable television, the technology that encouraged Dire Straits to write a whole song dedicated to the cultural juggernaut that was MTV.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for today. And just a quick note: instead of reading for this lecture, you’ve got some listening. I’ve assigned you an NPR radio interview with the authors of one of the best histories of MTV around, the 2011 book *I Want My MTV,* which I’ll reference throughout the lecture.

There is also a *bajillion* optional links in the module to check out *tons* ofmusic videos from across the medium’s early history, so give those a look if you’re so inclined.

**Timeline**

Okay, so, while this girl just wants to have fun, we’ve got to take care of some meatier concepts first. We’ve dedicated a few weeks this semester to thinking about television—what it owes the American public, how American households learned to live with it, how it reflected social change, and how it responded to that social change with new programs.

But today, I want to put all the history that we’ve learned into a bigger theoretical framework devised by a scholar named Amanda Lotz, in a book called *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. In that book, she suggests television has three major phases.

**Network Era**

Everything we’ve discussed about television until now took place during the network era, a span of time that runs from 1952 (after the FCC license freeze) through roughly the mid-1980s. Lotz says during that time:

*“US television remained static in its industrial practices. It maintained modes of production, a standard picture quality, and conventions of genre and schedule, all of which led to a common and regular experience for audiences.”*

What does that mean? Well, we know that television in the 1940s and 1950s inherited and reproduced a lot of characteristics from the radio: ideas like 30 to 60-minute program blocks, commercial sponsorships, liveness (or the appearance of liveness), and genres of programming like variety shows and soap operas. There was also the traditional schedule: news at appointed times, daytime programming that was generally was geared toward women, and primetime evening programming that was generally geared toward men or a mixed audience. Programs during the network era were designed to appeal to the industry’s vision of the mainstream audience, or sometimes the slightly narrower 18-34 demographic once you get into the era of relevancy.

This is old hat at this point, right? You’re TV history *pros* by now.

What Dr. Lotz is saying is that all these practices were deeply engrained in the television industry from the 1950s through the 1980s. It’s how the whole business ran, with little variation.

**Multichannel Transition**

This began to change in the 1980s, when we see the beginning of a new era of television that lasted until the early 2000s. Dr. Lotz calls this the “multichannel transition” era, during which

*“Various developments such as the growing availability of cable service and new cable channels, videocassette recorders (VCRs), and remote controls changed our experience with television, but did so…in a manner that allowed the industry to continue to operate in much the same way…”*

So, what does *that* mean? Well, it means that technology started to change the way the average viewer interacted with television. As we talked about in the video lecture, beginning in the late 1970s, viewers could record programs on their VCRs and watch them later, which gave them more power over the television schedule. They could also channel surf quickly with remote controls, allowing them to flip away instantly from anything that wasn’t catching their attention. That seems like a small shift, but truly, imagine walking across the room every time something you were watching got boring. You might be inclined to sit through some real turds if you were tired at the end of the day.

And finally, viewers were beginning to have more *choices,* which came in the form of cable networks.

**Cable**

The technology of cable television has its own history. It’s not important that you know how it works, just that you understand that operates differently than network television, which came free over the airwaves. Your television had a built-in antenna to pick up those channels. Cable television, on the other hand, required a physical connection (a.k.a, the *cable*) to a different network of equipment and programs, provided by an aptly-named *cable provider*.

**[ANIMATION]** And cable has a longer history than some might think. It actually began way back in 1948…

**Walson**

…when a man named John Walson realized it was kind of hard to sell televisions in his electronics store in rural Pennsylvania when he couldn’t get decent reception on any of them. How do you showcase a clear picture and crisp sound if all you can pick up is static?

An article on the history of cable TV from *Wired* magazine says that to remedy the problem, he “bolted an antenna to a utility pole, ran the signal through a booster, and strung it all together with coaxial cable. At long last, the TV in his electronics store in Mahanoy City, Pennsylvania, had bright, clear pictures” that he was picking up from much further away. He became the first cable provider when he started charging $2 a month to local households who wanted to be hooked up to his big antenna, which he accomplished by stringing a whole bunch more coaxial cable. As *Wired* put it, this “business model led to the cable TV subscription model we all know and hate.”

But Walson’s cable service wasn’t providing *different* channels, just a clearer connection to ABC, CBS, and NBC.

**1975**

Now, do you remember Newton Minow’s argument about the vast wasteland and his follow-up interview fifty years later? He said that his point was really about choice; in the network era, people only had a handful of channels to choose from, which meant that if every network was broadcasting mindless dreck, there was *only* mindless dreck to watch.

**[ANIMATION]** Beginning in about 1975, cable technology starts to answer Minow’s call for more choice in programming. The networks that establish themselves through cable can operate differently than the over-the-air major networks by providing more specialized programming.

**Revenue**

This is because they make their money in a different way. Cable networks still make money through commercials, just like NBC or CBS. But they also make an additional stream of revenue, in the form of subscriptions. And cable providers have more than one stream of revenue, too—you pay them a service fee, you rent equipment from them, and they sell local advertising, for example.

**Think**

Now, before we get too far into what kinds of shows popped up on these new cable networks, let’s think for a moment. If *you* were starting a network using this new cable technology, how would you decide what kind of a network you would be?

Would you try to catch all the eyeballs you could, like the over the air networks?

Would you concentrate on a particularly lucrative demographic?

Would you identify an underserved market?

Would you organize your programs around a theme or genre?

**Ted Turner**

Many of the earliest cable networks took that last route: identifying a genre and providing round-the-clock programming in that vein. We’ve already talked a little bit about HBO, which launched in the late 1970s and focused on providing uncut, unedited movies into people’s homes.

Ted Turner launched CNN, the first 24-hour news network, in 1980. Before that, news only aired at specific times or via urgent, breaking bulletins that interrupted regularly scheduled programming.

**ESPN**

ESPN launched in 1979, adapting the popular sports radio format into round-the-clock sports television. They launched thanks to one early investment from Anheuser Bush, who negotiated the right to be the only beer advertised on this new sports network, and another one from Getty Oil, of all companies.

Getty helped buy the land for ESPN’s studio and their giant satellite dish. In its first years, Getty had an 85% controlling stake in the company, but that investment was kind of unenthusiastic. They didn’t want to spend for the rights to broadcast popular American sports, like football or baseball, so early ESPN programming relied a lot on international sports like cricket.

It wasn’t until ABC bought a controlling stake that they were able to negotiate more lucrative and attractive broadcasting rights with major US sports leagues.

**MTV**

And in 1981, an experiment in adapting rock radio to television launched on cable with a NASA countdown, a blastoff, and an iconic graphic of an astronaut planting an MTV flag on the moon.

**Minnie the Moocher**

Now, MTV didn’t invent the idea of the music video—they just capitalized on it. There’s a hidden history of short musical films we can find if we look for it, beginning with a series of movies called “soundies” in the 1940s. Soundies showcased a performance of one song by cool musicians of the day like Cab Calloway or Fats Waller. I’ve included a link to the soundie for Calloway’s “Minnie the Moocher” in the additional links in this module.

**Scopitone**

We get closer to the modern music video in the 1960s, with a visual jukebox device called the scopitone. *How cool is this thing*? If I am every lottery rich, I am getting one of these for every room of my house.

Just like a regular jukebox, you pop in a coin and the machine plays a song. But a scopitone also plays a short film to accompany the song. There are lots of scopitone videos that you can watch on YouTube, but I’ve picked two for your additional links: one for Nancy Sinatra’s iconic “These Boots Are Made for Walking,” and one for Herb Alpert’s instrumental “Tijiuana Taxi,” which features some utterly unhinged 1960s dancing, which I hope you enjoy.

**Elvis**

And there was also, of course, a history of popular music on variety shows. That relationship was always a bit shaky, though, since the sexuality of rock-and-roll didn’t jibe with the conservative, family-friendly nature of early network programming. When Elvis Presley was finally allowed to air-hump his way through “Hound Dog” on Milton Berle’s show—on which he’d previously appeared, but always shot from the waist-up or with a guitar strategically covering his pelvic region—the network received more than fifty-thousand complaints about how inappropriate his dancing was.

**[ANIMATION]** *New York Times* television critic said of his performance, “His one specialty is an accented movement of the body that heretofore has been primarily identified with the repertoire of the blonde bombshells of the burlesque runway. The gyration never had anything to do with the world of popular music and still doesn’t.”

**Mick Jagger**

Well into the 1960s, artists routinely had to censor their lyrics in order to perform on family-friendly network television. Here, you can see Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones visibly roll his eyes when he had to sing “let’s spend some time together” instead of “let’s spend the night together” in 1967 on *The Ed Sullivan Show.*

**Austin City Limits**

And if we were meeting in person, I’d tell you to check out a plaque on the side of CMB, commemorating public broadcasting’s longest running pop music show, Austin City Limits. But while this show brought great music to the airwaves, the nature of PBS dictated the show’s character—it was more about singer-songwriters like Willie Nelson or Emmylou Harris performing a relatively no-frills stage show.

So, all of this is to say that pop music and the moving image did interact intermittently in the years before MTV, but *rarely in ways that were geared toward teenagers*—with a couple of exceptions.

**American Bandstand**

One exception was dance shows. The first long-running top forty dance show was called *American Bandstand*, and it was hosted for decades by Dick Clark. Clark would play popular records of the week while a cast of teenagers danced to them; usually, a band would appear live to lip sync along with one of their hits, too. While *American Bandstand* specifically featured teenagers, it was still subject to the same kinds of scrutiny as other network programs—songs were squeaky clean, and the show wasn’t racially integrated until 1964.

**Soul Train**

…leading to the popularity of *Soul Train* with Black audiences, whom *American Bandstand* had previously snubbed.

**Soul Train gifs**

The format was similar, but the show grew out of Chicago’s music scene, had a Black creator and host (the one and only Don Cornelius), and featured a predominantly Black group of dancers who, toward the end of the show, participated in the fabulous *Soul Train* line. Seriously, go check out some clips or even gifs—the dancing is unbelievable.

**Beatles**

The other successful pre-MTV musical show aimed at teenagers was a 1960s program that capitalized on the success of the Beatles’ feature film *A Hard Day’s Night*…

**The Monkees**

…and married pop music together with situation comedy. That show was *The Monkees*, which featured a fictional group assembled specifically for the show, but who went on to have real success as a band. The show had sitcom-esqe plots, but it also featured goofy, non-narrative segments where the band played their music.

**Mike Nesmith**

Mike Nesmith, one of the Monkees, argued that what drew him to the sit-com in the first place was the marriage of “music and the moving image.” He continued exploring that relationship well after the show and the band came to an end. In 1976, his record label asked him to create a promotional film for his forthcoming record. When he brought back not a concert video, but something very much resembling what we know today as a music video, the label loved it. They asked him to create these films for other artists.

**Popclips**

Instead, what he did was take their interest and parlay it into a short-lived cable television show called *Popclips*. It was exactly like MTV—a program, with a video disc jockey, who played music videos for an hour. Nesmith hooked up with a radio guy named John Lack, and together they pitched the show to the traditional networks, who wanted nothing to do with it—again, teenagers were not considered an especially lucrative market—but succeeded in finally selling it a little fledgling youth cable channel called Nickelodeon, which was owned by Warner Brothers.

The success of *Popclips*’s trial run on Nickelodeon secured the investment to start a whole network dedicated to music and young people…

**MTV telephone number**

…which of course, became MTV. Authors Rob Tannenbaum and Craig Marks home in on the tenuousness of MTV’s business model in the introduction to their wonderful book…

**Book Quote**

…pointing out that:

*“In 1981, there was no need for music videos. MTV was an outlet for a product that barely existed; the network had about a hundred of them in inventory, mostly by marginal or unpopular British and Australian bands. Not only that, MTV planned to get more videos by asking someone else, record labels, to make and pay for them, then hand them over for free. That’s not a business model, that’s chutzpah.”*

Further, there was the big question of why anyone would pay to advertise on a channel that mainly attracted 14-24 year-olds. This was not an audience with deep pockets, like the older, job-having, car-driving, home-owning crowd lured by CNN. Nor was it an audience considered valuable by *any* networks. In 1981 there was virtually no programming anywhere aside from *American Bandstand* and *Soul Train* specifically aimed at the teenage audience. So, MTV was an experiment on three fronts: cable television, teenage television, and music television.

**Madonna**

Tannenbaum and Marks argue that MTV succeeded because it was able to create a unique televisual aesthetic for music. They argue that the phrase “music video” is now defined by

*a specific set of qualities—aggressive directorship, contemporary editing and FX, sexuality, vivid colors, urgent movement, nonsensical juxtapositions, provocation, frolic, all combined for maximum impact on a small screen—that were not formalized until MTV provided a delivery system.*

And this new format, which was so experimental when the channel launched in 1981…

**Janet Jackson**

…became a bonafide art form by the end of that decade.

**Commercial**

But first, they needed to get people to watch. And to do that, the young group of executives running MTV needed to convince cable providers to carry the channel. This was not as simple a proposition as it sounded. In the words of MTV founder John Lack, many cable providers in 1981 were just small regional businesses run by engineers who were uninterested in providing America with the chance to watch Rod Stewart hop around in tight gold leggings singing about how sexy he was.

To get cable providers on board, they launched a hugely successful ad campaign that used short clips of the biggest stars MTV could muster urging teenagers to call their cable companies and tell them just how much they wanted their MTV **[PLAY CLIP.]**

**Musical Youth**

MTV was not without its faults, especially in its infancy. Some viewers were offended by the hair metal videos with scantily clad women writhing around on the hoods of cars, for example, but there were more structural complaints, too. What you’re looking at here is a group called Musical Youth, a British reggae band famous for the song “Pass the Dutchie,” which came out in 1982. The video for that song (included in the module) was the first video by a Black artist to appear on the channel, more than a year after it launched. And aside from Herbie Hancock’s video for “Robot Rock,” which hardly featured the artist, there were virtually no other Black artists in regular rotation in MTV’s early days.

MTV defended itself by arguing that they were simply adapting the rock radio format to television and there were few Black artists played on rock radio—though defending the channel by arguing that they were recreating radio’s segregated broadcasting practices is, as they say, a *choice.*

**David Bowie**

MTV’s whiteness was no secret at the time. A fascinating artifact of MTV’s early days which addresses this critique, and which you will watch for this lecture, is an interview between an MTV VJ and musician David Bowie from 1983, in which he specifically asks why the channel does not have more Black artists in the rotation.

**Thriller**

It wasn’t really until Michael Jackson came on the scene that MTV began to treat Black artists as potential stars, giving them more (and better) airtime and attention.

The video for “Thriller” also gives us an entry point to think about the ongoing relationship between music videos and feature film. “Thriller” was so successful in part because it looked like a film, and it was in fact directed by John Landis, a major film director famous for *Animal House* and *The Blues Brothers*.

**Bad**

Jackson worked with another big-name Hollywood director you might recognize a few years later—here, he’s pictured with Martin Scorsese, who directed the music video for “Bad” in 1987. This seemed to be the flow of power in the early days of music videos; if you wanted to raise your profile, you hired Hollywood talent.

**Hype Williams**

However, as MTV developed, so too did music video auteurs who mastered the form. Here’s one such director, Hype Williams, whose name became synonymous with bright, edgy, lush, fish-eye hip hop videos in the 1990s, like Missy Elliott’s breakthrough video for “The Rain.”

**Spike Jonze**

And eventually, that flow of talent between Hollywood and music videos becomes more of a two-way street. Spike Jonze cut his teeth directing videos like Bjork’s “Oh So Quiet” and the Beastie Boys’ “Sabotage,” and this wacky one for Fatboy Slim’s “Weapon of Choice,” featuring Christopher Walken dancing in an empty department store…

**Jonze**

…and Jonze of course went on to become an influential director of Hollywood feature films, helming movies like *Her*.

**Matsoukas**

There’s also the more recent career of Melina Matsoukas, who directed tons of gorgeous videos like Rihanna’s “We Found Love” and Beyonce’s iconic “Formation.”

**Queen and Slim**

Matsoukas went on to direct last year’s *Queen and Slim*, which even as a feature film, intermittently retains the feel of her musical projects. It’s interspersed with dancing, dramatic lighting, graceful pans, tableaux-like composition of individual shots, and slow motion.

**WAP**

It’s worth mentioning, of course, that MTV was not integral to the success of “We Found Love,” or “Formation,” or “WAP,” which was easily the biggest music video of the last few months. This indicates that the internet has helped the music video form that MTV basically invented grow beyond its cable TV origins. Their aesthetics remain recognizable—we know a music video when we see one—but neither MTV nor cable television remains an important means of circulating music videos throughout the culture.

But it’s still an important trajectory to chart. When viewed as a point in history, we can see MTV as this transition point between a number of things:

Between Dr. Lotz’s network era and the multichannel transition era

Between huge mainstream audience for network shows and niche audiences for cable

Between segregated and integrated music programming

And, as MTV increasingly struggles to remain relevant, between television and the internet—a topic we’ll discuss in more detail next week.

**Vulture**

…and that is where I usually end this lecture! Except on November 12, 2020, Netflix announced a new experiment it’s calling “Netflix Direct.” They’re trying it out in France, but if you look at this screenshot, you can see that it is scheduled programming chosen by humans at Netflix, which plays at certain times. Now, does that remind you of anything?

Does it sound like…say…*cable freakin’ television*??

Now, of course, there are some differences. Cable is as much defined by its technology as the content it brings to you. And Netflix isn’t saying “Netflix Direct” has the same business rationale as cable television did, which was to provide more choices in programming to specific market niches. In fact, Netflix Direct comes from the opposite perspective! There are *too many* things to choose from on Netflix. Their data shows that people spend five or ten minutes browsing their enormous library, and often simply exit if they can’t find anything that grabs them. Their hope is that Netflix Direct might hook you into something before you get choice fatigue.

They also hope Netflix Direct will serve as a way to catch viewers up before new seasons of a program are released, and that it might meet the needs of a *still quite large* group of viewers who enjoy watching a curated slate of programs at the same time as others.

So, in some ways, the media industry that brought us MTV in 1981 feels very far away. But in other ways, the question of how much choice, and how much community a viewer wants is very current indeed.