

Martin Kasarda

Shocking in Popular Music: Commodification by Eccentricity

Abstract

Intentional eccentricity is a strategy targeted at how to capture publicity and media. Since the time of the emerging modern bourgeois society, exalted artistic eccentricity, bohemianism, has been a regular and significant part of social discourse. Dandy was a hero who needed to be distinguished from the petty-bourgeois lowness. Eccentricity as a working method has been a typical characteristic for radical modernistic art movements such as Dada, Futurism or Surrealism. Popular music has involved eccentricities since the early 1950s, however Elvis or later the Beatles may seem very polite to us today. It is a question of cultural context and pushing boundaries. Eccentricity has become a recognizable brand, identifier and attraction, which should arouse the interest of the audience, attract spectacular visuals or deliberate gossip. However, sometimes it is not clear whether the shock is just a promotional strategy or an artistic intention. Thus, eccentricity plays a huge role in the popularization and commodification of pop-cultural products as a marketing tool that

helps build the artist's image, product-recognizable differences and create different ways of linking audiences, with music production itself and its visual presentation often the result of a non-authorial but culturally industrial approach to music.

Key words

Blasphemy. Culture. Eccentricity. Kitsch. Media. Pop music. Shock.

Introduction

Since its beginnings, music went hand in hand with podium presentation; hence, it naturally had a visual element. The arrival of radio broadcast and music storage media such as vinyl records, cassettes and CDs represented a change in the paradigm of perception of music from live performance (therefore, an audio-visual experience) to a reproduced sound recording (purely acoustic experience). The birth of television – especially MTV, the first music television channel founded in 1981 – can be seen as a spiral-like return of music to its visual element on a new level. A non-ironic line drawn after the era

of radio dominance was the famous song *Video Killed the Radio Star* that opened the MTV broadcast on 1st of August 1981¹. This song turned the world of music back to the inevitability of serving music production along with a visual experience. Overproduction created by the music arts-industrial complex – musicbusinessworldwide.com states that each day, creators add over 40,000 music units to Spotify!² – naturally causing extreme levels of opacity and confusion. Recognizable, unique music brands, like we used to know in popular culture during the times of Frank Sinatra, Elvis, or The Beatles, are disappearing under the weight of extreme amounts of production. The listener encounters current production, but at the same time perceives the offer of music recorded in the last decades. Musical

1 MARKS, C., TANNENBAUM, R.: *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution*. New York, NY : Plume and Penguin, 2012, pp. 40-41.

2 INGHAM, T.: *Nearly 40,000 Tracks are Now Being Added to Spotify Very Single Day*. [online]. [2022-03-14]. Available at: <<https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/nearly-40000-tracks-are-now-being-added-to-spotify-every-single-day/>>.

noise is offered by David Bowie next to Justin Bieber, The Everly Brothers next to Spice Girls and Led Zeppelin as classical music today. Eclecticism and ahistorism dominate pop music. The life of such an amount of music from an economic point of view today allows for an effect called The Long Tail effect, which was pointed out in 2004 by Chris Anderson and its effect in the digital environment has been studied by other authors³. Today, if a creator wants to make a living with their music only, a true musical talent, inevitably, must go hand in hand with visual presentation. Since YouTube, we can also talk about “video turn in the music industry around 2008”⁴. The topic of our research is not to search for the one element of music that creates just the right catchy meme. Even Richard Dawkins, the creator of the word meme, noticed that music is a great example of what meme, a mental gene, mental virus, truly means⁵. We are interested in one of the elements of visual presentation of music that appears virtually during the entire history of pop music. We will call this element intentional eccentricity, an effort of the artist to wow the audience by his appearance

3 See: ANDERSON, CH.: *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*. New York : Hyperion, 2006; AGUIAR, L., WALDFOGEL J.: Quality Predictability and the Welfare Benefits from New Products: Evidence from the Digitization of Recorded Music. In *Journal of Political Economy*, 2018, Vol. 126, No. 2, pp. 492-524.

4 HOLT, F.: Is Music Becoming More Visual? Online Video Content in the Music Industry. In *Visual Studies*, 2011, Vol. 26, No. 1, p. 50.

5 DAWKINS, R.: *The Selfish Gene*. New York, NY : Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 384.

or presentation⁶. Interpreting the visual presentation of pop music, we can see a whole range of eccentricity – from violence, to infantilization, to eroticism in various forms, to blasphemy.

In her essay *Notes on Camp*, Susan Sontag wrote in the 1964 about intentional, shallow provocation as a disgrace to a culture, a trash and camp. Looking at music videos of the proudly depressed Billie Eilish, or the glorifying of death by Marilyn Manson, or aesthetics of ugliness by Die Antwoord or Nine Inch Nails, Susan Sontag would probably feel rather perplexed today. Sontag considers displays of eccentricity in popular culture to be vulgar and talks about them as if they were a victory of aesthetics over morale: “Indeed the essence of camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration. And camp is esoteric – something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques”⁷. The essence of camp aesthetic is “loving the unnatural, artificial, even fake and affected”⁸. Affect, however, is a completely natural part of artistic expression, the unnatural and artificial being the effort to gain attention and to be different. The same applies

6 See e.g.: HUDÍKOVÁ, Z., PRAVDOVÁ, H., BLAHÚT, D.: Post-Lockdown Metamorphoses of Television Culture. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2021, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 88-99; RADOŠIN-SKÁ, J.: On Cinderella Men and Peaceful Warriors: “Sportainment” in American Mainstream Cinema. In *Communication Today*, 2018, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 20-36.

7 SONTAG, S.: *Notes on Camp*. London : Penguin, 2018, p. 4.

8 BOŽILOVIČ, N.: *Gýčová kultúra*. Bratislava : Malé Centrum, 2014, p. 76.

for the Baroque as well as the contemporary popular culture. What Sontag names as extravagant only to be extravagant, as deprived of any moral values in favour of the aesthetic distinction, has happened and still happens as a natural part of the artistic world. The borders of kitsch are not strictly laid out – this is aesthetically pleasing, and this is kitsch – but lie in the context of the age, and of the acceptance of the audience. Consumer culture naturally likes to be kitschy, because only then is it palatable for many, for the masses it is naturally intended for.

Even in the extravagant, the kitsch, tasteless and camp is given a hidden meaning by the symbolical codex of popular culture. Marketing of contemporary popular music draws from the tradition set out in dandyism back in the 19th century, in the exaltation of the bohemian environment, in the futuristic modernism that glorified otherness/ the queer, being distinguishable as an important part of artistic expression. Naturally, in the discussion we can ask questions about superficial shallowness, eccentricity as a kitschy effort to attract by shock, drawing attention (for a while, at least) of the postmodern, shallow, nihilistic view of the world where everything is possible and to have fun is considered a human right. There are not actually that many topics that culture uses as shocking. They can be divided into groups such as sexuality (Eros), violence and death (Thanatos), revolutionary/ anarchistic and political gestures,

inter-cultural or generational conflicts or liberalization of the way of life. These groups are not strictly separated but rather overlap. Yet very rarely the performance is a true manifesto or a demand but rather a topicalization intended to disrupt or update our perception of society and its conventions. On the other hand, this shocking eccentricity in popular culture is contained by producers, creators of music and music videos, so that it is naturally opinionated and conforms to consumers' expectations or to topics that are at that moment enjoyed by popular culture consumers or topics that consumers expect.

1 Provocation as the Artistic Gesture: The Dandy and the Bohemian

If we are talking about intentional eccentricity, we must go back to the time of the birth of the dandy character. In the search for the starting point of fascination for eccentricity, we have to dive into the depths of arts history and look for the era of birth of the perception of an individual artist – a Bohemian as a specific and an eccentric creator. Naturally, influenced by Miloš Forman's movie *Amadeus*, it may seem to us today that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was a bohemian popstar of his time. The truth is that the break of the 18th and 19th century was, from the perspective of forming a perception of the eccentric in the art, the era of the birth of the bohemian and his heroic twin, the dandy. Both categories – the bohemian and the dandy – share

many features; in case of many unique artists' personalities they may even overlap, but not every bohemian is inevitably a dandy and vice versa.

The phenomenon of dandyism was covered by many great authors, a thorough history of the dandy can be found in the works of, e.g., Françoise Coblence⁹ or Daniel Salvatore Schiffer¹⁰. In both cases, authors take a look back at the long and ostentatious series of eccentric personalities such as George "Beau" Brummell, Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, Barbey d'Aurevilly, up to the contemporary pop-cultural scene, where, especially Schiffer, does not forget pop-culture figures such as David Bowie or Lou Reed. A modern dandy was simply a person that wanted to stand out. Dandy's eccentric attitude was "the protest against the averageness of a modern society"¹¹. Dandy was a person that "worked on his own standing-out at times when the whole world was being standardized and his intention was to parade the aristocratic superiority of his spirit face-to-face against the laws of the mass and namelessness"¹². To a degree, Dandy represented a two-faced figure. On one hand, a liberated artist that revolted against the aristocratic canon of

⁹ See: COBLENCE, F.: *Dandysmus. Povinnost pochybnosti*. Prague : Prostor, 2003.

¹⁰ See also: SCHIFFER, D. S.: *Dandysmus, poslední záblesk heroism*. Prague : Karolinum, 2012.

¹¹ COBLENCE, F.: *Dandysmus. Povinnost pochybnosti*. Prague : Prostor, 2003, p. 39.

¹² COBLENCE, F.: *Dandysmus. Povinnost pochybnosti*. Prague : Prostor, 2003, p. 39.

old society by democratizing it (by putting focus on appearance, small-talk conversation, ostentatious superiority, and unprincipled disdain for commonness); on the other hand, a dandy was a prototype of resistance against the rising urban and bourgeois uniformity, against the production-line-manufactured, uniform inhabitants of cities. By trying to programmatically deviate from the norms, dandy was a resistance against the democracy of 'everybody is equal'. Dandyism was programmatically nihilistic, relativistic, cynical, and individualistic. While this approach does not mean resignation, it can lead, as Schiffer writes, "to creation of alternative values in unusual forms, such as values of creating (but not values of truth) (...) it is a re-creation of ostentatious and extraordinary form of uniqueness"¹³. It is Schiffer that also warns of accepting the dandyism model of individuality, uniqueness, and fascination by Eros (sexuality) and Thanatos (death) in popular culture: "Today, we may consider some aspects of rock to be means of expression of dandyism"¹⁴. Individualization as an effort to stand out from the mass is in its own way a gesture, a symbolic act. At the same time, the element of eccentricity emphasizes the resistance against conventions, conscious rejection of moral duties and values. We must perceive an

¹³ SCHIFFER, D. S.: *Dandysmus, poslední záblesk heroism*. Prague : Karolinum, 2012, p. 77.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 172.

eccentricity of an artistic gesture in context. What was, in dandyism, hidden in suggestions or metaphors, has been, in contemporary popular culture, explicit for a long time and does not cause any blushing, scandalous reactions of the audience or even persecution of the artist for their artistic expression anymore.

In this sense, eccentricity, standing out from society by ostentatious uniqueness, is linked to the term artistic bohemia, that is mostly linked to the 19th century and metropolitan Parisian artistic world. This is primarily thanks to the French novelist Henri Murger's book *Scenes of Bohemian Life* (the novel was published in 1851), which later served as an inspiration to Giacomo Puccini's opera *Bohème*. Etymologically, the word "bohemia" has a crooked history, at first it referred to the Roma population coming from the lands of today's Czechia (in medieval French, Bohemia was used to name this region) in 15th century or as a part of Hussite heretics fleeing the Czech lands to France¹⁵.

It was this rogueship, living on the edge and affinity to comedy and music that led to the transition of the word Bohemia to the artistic circles living in poverty, on the edges of middle-class urban bourgeois society. That is where the meaning of Bohemian as people searching for liberty and happiness

¹⁵ WALKER, A.: *What is Bohemian?* [online]. [2022-03-14]. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-12711181>>.

in arts and joy of life, comes from. In the mid-19th century, Bohemian was settled as a term referring to artists, poets, musicians, actors, among which there was never a lack of extravagance, enjoyment of life of liberty (including sexuality or consumption of intoxicating substances), unconventionality. Forming the modern artistic world was closely connected to the radicalism of stances and opinions on urban bourgeois society, it was a revolutionary, late-romantic gesture; what is more, it was successfully idealized as a heroism of individual uprising.

The character of an individualistic genius suffering for art, is a mythical depiction of the eccentric bohemian's persona, overlooked and rejected due to his 'weirdness', though, by his art, he himself oversteps our perception and paints for the future, for the glory. Misunderstood artists have swarmed in a massive generation at the beginning of 20th century, which, along with revolutionary ideological ferment, lay grounds for the foundation of artistic movements that were programmatically provoking, intentionally eccentric. Futurism, dada, surrealism, revolutionary Russian avant-garde; in music, dodecaphony, or the birth of jazz; it all contained eccentricity and resistance against contemporary conventions as an integral part of Bohemian – the liberty, the gesture of rejection of obedience of the stiff and uptight system.

Eccentricity, therefore, has roots in the dandy's gesture. On one hand, an aristocratic and hyperbolized

individuality of a unique subject aiming for the thought nihilism and Aryan superiority (in Nietzsche's sense) of the *Übermensch*; on the other hand, we have the standing-out of the bohemian edge of metropolitan society, an artistic gesture of liberty, revolutionary verve, equality. While the first, dandy gesture was ironic, the other was leaning towards pathetic. At its core, both dandyism and bohemia agree on its stance to the majority, bourgeois society that insisted on uniformity, growing line-production and mass consumption.

For bourgeois society, eccentric artists were mostly a source of amusement, uniqueness and refreshing of life. Scandalization became a part of artistic processes as well as a space that attracted mass media. One of the first artists to understand the exceptionality of an artistic gesture and extravagance as a useful marketing tool to attract an audience was Salvador Dalí, a surrealist with a business spirit, a painter whose work is provocative – but intentionally – and has a straightforward business purpose. This principle of monetization of the shocking, the extravagant, attracted the attention of various other artists. At the same time, the unique figure of the bohemian and the dress of nihilistic irony of the dandy took place as an added value in artistic communication. For artists, differentiation and standing-out is their personal commercial brand. Andy Warhol named this in a straightforward manner, when he devoted his whole artistic life to the tri-combination of dandyistic

uniqueness, bohemian eccentric patheticism and directed marketing intended to break through to the commercial world of art.

2 Shock or Profit

Watching music production in connection with its visual presentation naturally raises questions in the head of the interpreter of such a world: Is this just a marketing effort to stand out and create one's own "brand"? Or does this eccentricity stem from the artist's internal need to give voice to his vision of the world by doing something extra? Can we trust the pop-music scene that its efforts in breaking taboos or behaviours approaching unacceptable in mainstream society do come from inner beliefs? Or is this an intentional, calculated provocation, rebel pose for the pose itself? Is this intentional usage of avant-garde practices intended to parody the wannabe-bourgeoisie, mainstream seriousness? Or do the artists exploit typical capitalist marketing stunts to attract an audience? Of course, there is no boundary line between an artistic act and a marketing move. Shocking and provocative can be both a sincere effort to overcome social taboos as well as an effort for a thoughtful marketing move (At this point, we cannot fail to mention Benetton's marketing, when photographer Oliviero Toscani deliberately combined provocation, taboo and

marketing in the sale of sweaters ...) ¹⁶. What is Madonna actually doing when, in her music video to the song *Medellín* ¹⁷, she's seducing a singer Maluma that's thirty years younger than her or in her song *Girls Gone Wild* ¹⁸ (but also many others), in which she's changing the traditional men-women relationships in openly sadomasochistic scenes? Her *Justify my Love* ¹⁹ about a woman searching for pure sexual pleasure was rejected for broadcast by many music channels ²⁰, but that was 1990 – what would happen today? With tens of millions of views on YouTube, nobody actually needs television anymore. Today, this Madonna video is one of the classic examples of changes in dynamics and diversity in music video production, as well as changes in the social acceptance of cultural values ²¹. What was taboo for television thirty years ago is now freely available on the Internet. In his surreal music video to *We are chaos*, Marilyn Manson ²² visually

¹⁶ TOSCANI, O.: *Die Werbung ist ein lächelndes Aas*. Köln : Bollmann Vlg, 1998.

¹⁷ MADONNA, MALUMA: *Medellín*. [online]. [2022-03-14]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAXNaLAR2to>>.

¹⁸ MADONNA: *Girls Gone Wild*. [online]. [2022-03-14]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKwziTrv5o>>.

¹⁹ MADONNA: *Justify My Love*. [online]. [2022-03-14]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Np_Y74OaRel>.

²⁰ MACKIE, D.: *VIDEO: 'Justify My Love,' 25 Years Later – A Short History of the Song, the Controversy and, Yes, the Sex*. [online]. [2022-03-14]. Available at: <<https://people.com/celebrity/justify-my-love-turns-25-20-things-you-didnt-know/>>.

²¹ KORSGAARD, M. B.: Changing Dynamics and Diversity in Music Video Production and Distribution. In BURNS, L. A.: *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music Video Analysis*. London : Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019, pp. 13-27.

²² MANSON, M.: *We Are Chaos*. [online].

flirts with the symbols of death, changes his head to a skull, takes what are obviously hallucinogenic pills, and bathes in a blood-like liquid. And where does the Mongolian ethno-metal group The Hu belong, attracting with a bizarre mix of Mongolian mythological symbolism, shaman's chants (the archetypical sorcerer) and hard-rock? What about personalities in the zone of uncertain sexuality, that go hand in hand with popular culture since the times of androgynous David Bowie, Freddie Mercury, Boy George, until the eccentricists of today, such as Yungblud, the group Palaye Royale, or artists such as Todrick Hall or Jefree Star? These artists are programmatically committed to their sexual orientation and bring the clubbing scene to the mainstream. Is this a fight for the rights of the sexual minorities, or just an effort to gain interest, shock, and, ultimately, profit? The answer to this question is not clear. If the artist is engaged in minorities, subcultures and perceives his expression as authentic, his sound and impact is socially and politically authentic. If the provocation is created by a mainstream artist as provocative marketing, we can perceive it as a cynical commercial strategy.

This is not the case only for figures on the outskirts of the entertainment industry. Since the time of the shocking (and, today, amusing) zombie walk in the ten-minute

[2022-03-14]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQJFP1INGxs>>.

music video to Michael Jackson's *Thriller* ²³; until today's production efforts, effects, and CGI; the visual culture of music videos had to come to terms with visual extremism that is no longer shocking – in the sense of raising opposition and public opinion. Today, it's not expected at all for a music video to find its way to the offices of even the Vatican, to be condemned, though that was the case of Madonna's 1989 hit *Like a Prayer* ²⁴. Though the Vatican spoke about blasphemy, in 2008, during her Rome performance, Madonna dedicated this song to the Pope himself. This is not blasphemy but rather a commercial strategy, similar to when Lady Gaga famously wore a meat outfit to MTV Awards in 2010 or when Robbie Williams ²⁵ undressed to bare bones in his *Rock DJ* music video. Pop-culture wants to be eccentric, shocking, ostentatiously kitschy and hyperbolized.

3 Death and the Queer

In the music video to the alt-rock band Palaye Royale's ²⁶ song "Lonely", the singer Remington Keith digs his own grave in the middle of a football stadium. Most of

²³ JACSKON, M.: *Thriller*. [online]. [2022-03-14]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOnqjkJTMaA>>.

²⁴ BALSAMO, B. et al.: *Like a Prayer – Video. Madonna in Pop Culture*. [online]. [2022-03-14]. Available at: <<https://madonnainpopculture.weebly.com/like-a-prayer.html>>.

²⁵ WILLIAMS, R.: *Rock DJ*. [online]. [2022-03-14]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnO3nijfYmU>>.

²⁶ PAYALE ROYLAE: *Lonely*. [online]. [2022-03-14]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5Nc4kiBals>>.

the video he is dressed in women's dresses, takes loads of pills and the video visually references the dirty aesthetic of drug-themed movies such as *Trainspotting* or *Naked Lunch*. The singer's appearance and makeup make it very difficult to discern whether we are looking at a starving teen girl with a typical heroin look, or an adolescent boy with an uncertain sexuality. The feeling of loneliness stems from the typical teen relationship with the collapsing family, where normal upbringing is lost to constant arguments, destruction, pills, and where a suicide attempt is an escape from a depressive situation. Of course, a considerable amount of this is a recurring aesthetic cliché found long before the existence of this rock discovery. The conflict of a bad family against the hopelessness of adolescence is an archetypal connection in European culture and can be observed repeatedly since the times of Greek mythology. The rock music scene is connected with drug alternatives and suicidal tendencies since its inception. The case of Iggy Pop was an authentic confession of a punk outsider from the edge of the society, a protest against an uptight society and escape from the norms of consumer and bourgeois society. The case of Palaye Royale's music video presentation is a calculated marketing stunt, professionally filmed by a production company intended to shock teenagers (and their parents) and create a feeling of rebellion against both the family and the society.

The picture of a young suicide digging his own grave on a football turf is a sarcastic depiction referencing today's modern holy grounds – the football field. To dig a grave there is a desecration, graver than the suicide itself. The scene almost suggests an interpretation that digging on a sports field is even worse than the purpose of the digging itself – a pathetic death. Extrovert homosexuality is a signature of Todrick Hall, one of the most prominent and loudest representant of LGBTQ community in USA. A singer, performer, and a social media hero; his videos accumulated tens of millions of views. Coming-outs (public confessions to orientation other than heterosexual) still cause – in some parts of the society, at least – aversion. Even in countries where civil unions and gay marriages are already legal, conservatives consider them inappropriate and controversial. The controversy of these private affairs attracts the media.

Todrick Hall joins other artists who, through their artistic activities, came out of the closet and, e.g., in his musically inventive dance song *Nails, Hair, Hips, Heels* (referencing the child song *Head, Shoulders, Knees, Toes*) opens – in an artistically expressive manner – the beauty of gay night clubs to the general public ²⁷. On an industrially inspired neon dance floor, one by

²⁷ HALL, T.: *Nails, Hair, Hips, Heels*. [online]. [2022-03-14]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQ04gPb4LlY>>.

one, groups of male dancers clad in tight black bodysuits with loud colourful accessories gather and dance in shiny heels. All the dancers are men, but the stylization of their dance moves makes it clear that their dance (as well as the song's text) has explicit erotic meaning within the gay community. The visual and verbal eccentricity may seem extrovert and aggressively provocative, yet at the same time it is a gesture of bravery against the majority, since it forces the viewer to accept the queer/otherness and, in fact, also realize that this is not a small minority but a behaviour of a large group of people. Todrick Hall and his dancers speak clearly – you think I am eccentric, but I am not alone.

In comparison, Madonna's *Girls Gone Wild* features similar provocative dancers, dressed only in ladies' tights and high heels. The music video is black and white with apparent references to the BDSM community, aggressiveness, dominance, and sexual vulgarity, not a first for Madonna. After all, Madonna, the brightest-shining star of popular culture provocation, flirted with lesbian themes in the time around her album *Erotica* or when she kissed Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera during MTV Awards, one of the most-watched popular culture events. In her works, she repeatedly managed to use icons of various subcultures and turn extravagance into kitsch. A good example of thought-through intended thematization of shocking yet conventional perception of values

is Madonna that, during her career, often used eccentricity as a way to stay in focus of the media. She makes a topic out of things that appear in the public discourse at first in its radical form or in intellectual analyses. Madonna herself takes these topics and gives them the pop-cultural shallow and palatable treatment for the broad consumer public in such a sophisticated manner that her shocking provocation stays attractive even for mainstream media. From her other songs and music videos we can name the song *Medellín*²⁸, where she is supported by young Colombian singer Maluma. The song follows the relationship of an older dance teacher (Madonna) and a young dancer (Maluma) and ends with a wedding. Yet, this shallow romantic story is controversial in several ways. However well Madonna's facial makeup covers the age difference of the then-61-year-old singer and 25-year-old Maluma, it paints the picture of a liberal relationship between a younger man and an older, sexually free woman. This approach is emphasized with domina-like stylization of female hero (not for the first time in Madonna's career). Another topic is the American-Colombian relationship: Medellín is an infamous eyesore of American drug enforcement. Medellín is known as one of the most dangerous towns

28 MADONNA, MALUMA: *Medellín*. [online]. [2022-03-14]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xANaLAR2to>>.

in Latin America and a center of the Colombian drug trade. The video, however, references Medellín as a city of passion, dance, wealth (opulent wedding feast acts as an opposite of life in poor slums of Medellín). A typical American cowboy hat, a part of Madonna's wedding costume that, in connection with Latin-American dance atmosphere, speaks of conjoining cultures usually opposed against each other. Even a simple pop-cultural artistic template can be eccentric, after all.

4 Problem of the Context

When perceiving eccentricity or provocation, the context is very important. A thing that is provocative to one consumer can be amusing to another. That applies to both individuals as well as cultural groups defined by society, state, belief, or other criteria. When discussing culture, it is difficult to set boundaries on what is plainly amusing (and creative), what is eccentric (in relation to what?), what is provocative (on purpose, ethically, in a socially acceptable way), and what is unacceptable ("crosses the line", is insulting). We can attest that in any cultural studies research, the perception of the context in which the artwork was created and the context in which the percipient receives it, is very important. The perception of products of culture has three perceptual limitations resulting from the context:

1. Global vs. local: Despite the will to communicate globally, one always perceives a product of culture in local cultural context. What the USA perceives as a controversial provocation can be acceptable in Western Europe. What is common in the relationship of a man and a woman in France can be perceived as politically incorrect in the USA. What we, in Europe, perceive as kitsch can be considered as cultural heritage in China or Japan. In the dominance of the British-American pop music production and creation of the popstar, the global values (social, political, ethical, relational) are naturally copied or reflected in music production and visual art in various other cultural frameworks. The leaking of local culture into the global can serve as an interesting spice, or as an eccentricity against the global canon. Exotic motifs in music are nothing new, we meet in classical music (just mention W.A. Mozart, F. Liszt, F. Chopin or A. Khachaturian) and popular culture, the whole stream of world music has grown on it. Exoticism has long been an element that brings new, exciting impulses to the listener. We can even talk about the commodification of the exotic²⁹. Today, this is also happening at the level of the music video. For example, the Mongolian ethno-rock group The Hu in its music videos (e.g., *Wolf Totem* or *Yuve-Yuve Yu*) uses ethnic elements of Mongolian mythological heritage,

29 TAYLOR, T.: *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World*. Durham, USA : Duke University Press, 2017, p. 328.

shamanic singing, and traditional music instruments in combination with rock sound. This creates an eccentric version of a local rock music that, with its eccentricity, appeals to the global listener. "Exotic" in connection with rough rock boys is an appealing eccentric marketing moment that attracts, though the ethnic elements can also be perceived as using a kitschy template in a new context.

2. Past vs. present: The de-historization whilst consuming culture causes that, due to today's digital availability, the past and the present is accessible in the same volume at a moment's notice. When we watch music videos from the 80s and then come to the latest products, our time perspective of the product perception does not change. We see or hear a music product that is even 50 years old and we may be amused with the naivety of the creators or be surprised by their extravagance. One way or the other, with our today's contextual perceptions, we may miss the reasons the product of culture used to be provocative and now it appears kitschy. A great example is Madonna's song *Like a Prayer* from 1989 that was refused harshly by the Vatican, since the music video featured a black martyr, Christ's wounds and burning crosses. Today, the song appears as a pure pseudo-blasphemy kitsch. Over time, provocation has lost its eccentricity, and its calculated marketing use seems too obvious and shallow.

3. Parents vs. children: Popular music is primarily a part of the creative industry, where craftsmanship and creative potential work together with an aim to create products that "hit it" with certain parts of the audience. At its beginning in the 50s, popular music had youth in its genes; it was aimed at the new post-war generation. To be eccentric, Elvis and other early rock and roll stars needed only to be flashy in their dance moves suggesting sex. The 60s opened with "long-haired" The Beatles, only to climax in the eruption of Woodstock and hippie generation, in which the "old-young" opposites spontaneously combusted and were transported through not only the cultural space, but through every social and political event. By natural aging of these generations the quirks and eccentricity of hippies and rock stars entered the mainstream and became accepted. (Sex Pistols performed at the 2012 London Olympics opening ceremony, The Beatles and many others were appointed royal orders by Queen Elizabeth II.) So, when new generations wanted (and still want) to stand out and find their cultural patterns, they naturally need to be even more eccentric than their parents. Naturally, the androgynous David Bowie of the 70s does not, in today's era of open LGBTQ membership, appear scandalous at all.

Conclusion

The invention of radio, the advent of music media and television broadcasting changed the perception of music drastically. At first due to the rise of music storage mediums; later due to music television that required the spectacular; the last element that significantly affected the visual performance became the era of YouTube. YouTube has significantly changed distribution channels, but also the perception of the visual side of music towards greater visual freedom in presentations unrestricted by the demands of television broadcasters³⁰. The flood of information and virtually limitless offer causes the need to stand out as much as possible.

It cannot be said that every artistic gesture in popular culture is primarily intended to be monetized. No doubt there are artists that, in their words of deep artistic impression, will perceive the aesthetics of ugly, the sexual provocations or odes to death as a natural component of their artistic expression.

Intentional eccentricity is proven today as a combination of artistic gestures, authentic utterance and marketing intent to break through the noise and visual smog of the digital environment. Madonna is not primarily artistically eccentric,

but uses eccentricity as a marketing tool, self-presentation. The subcultural and minority testimonies we encounter in Todrick Hall, for example, can seem like an honest, artistic gesture. But how should the recipient of today's culture distinguish it? There is no dividing line, intentional eccentricity is a property that we simply have to count on as part of the musical environment in the current production. Whether its origin is artistic statement or marketing. Today, eccentricity and shock remain an autonomous marketing scheme to attract the attention of a volatile, fluid audience. Ethical value paradigms are complicated social constructs that spread across all social structures - family, education, politics, media. The difficulty of stepping out of the language of its age and social conventions makes it difficult to name the implicitness of these paradigms. Eccentricity is a part of these values, we can directly state an assumption that the artist producing pop-cultural content will be eccentric, because only by that they fit the paradigm of perception of the current environment.

Except when you expect eccentricity, it stops being eccentric.

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Author

Assoc. Prof. PhDr. Martin Kasarda, Dr. martin.kasarda@paneurouni.com

Faculty of Mass Media
Pan-European University
Tematínska 10
85105 Bratislava
SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Profile of the Author

Assoc. Prof. PhDr. Martin Kasarda, Dr. (1968) is Head of Mass Media and Marketing Communication Department, Faculty of Mass Media, Pan-european University. M. Kasarda is also editor-in-chief of the monthly Book Magazine, the most popular print magazine about literature, and bestsellers in Slovakia. He published several books about culture, media communications. He also writes fiction, has published three novels and three short story books.

³⁰ KORSGAARD, M. B.: Changing Dynamics and Diversity in Music Video Production and Distribution. In BURNS, L. A.: *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music Video Analysis*. London : Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019, p. 13.