ESSENTIAL QUESTION
How did MTV help create a visual space in which artists could, inadvertently or not, challenge established ideas about gender?

OVERVIEW
In the mid-1950s, when Rock and Roll was first emerging as a genre, the United States was in what many consider a conservative period. In those post-war years, with Cold War anxieties coloring everyday life, mainstream America seemed to be content celebrating the home, the traditional family unit, and the quiet predictability both could provide. Mid-century advertising marketed emerging domestic technologies designed to fill those new homes with the latest labor-saving devices: kitchen appliances for a happy, homemaking wife—in a dress, of course—and power tools or a grill for the male provider. Though the early stars of Rock and Roll were groundbreaking in many ways, generally boys were boys and girls were girls, as they say. The males wore suits, the females dresses.

In the 1960s, Rock and Roll, like American life as a whole, underwent a metamorphosis. In 1964, The Beatles kicked off the British Invasion in matching suits. By 1968, however, their outfits were radically different. Uniformity had given way to individually chosen bell bottoms, patterned shirts and a new explosion of color. At Woodstock in 1969, The Jimi Hendrix experience wore blouses, while in the coming decade many male rockers, such as Robert Plant and Mick Jagger, embraced elements of fashion styles previously considered feminine. Artists such as Brian Eno, Freddie Mercury and David Bowie, all seen in Soundbreaking Episode Seven, went a step further, crafting personas that combined the visual symbols of “masculinity” and “femininity.” Through clothing, hair style and body language these artist presented an almost genderless kind of “androgyny.” However, throughout that era, the act of “gender play” was a game mostly for the boys. Female performers rarely reversed the equation and took on aspects of masculinity, which suggested that gender play was merely an extension of male privilege.

All of the above was before the launch of MTV on August 1, 1981.

Music had been on television via variety and dance shows, and on special segments in other types of programming, but MTV was the first television channel dedicated entirely to music videos. As such, it was a bit of a “Wild West,” the rules were few. MTV had no established models for success to follow, no executives with previous experience and no significant back catalog of music videos to fill
its 24-hour-a-day programming. For the music industry, it was a fertile site for experimentation, and, due to the way it merged sound and image, video created a space in which interested artists could further manipulate the visual symbols of gender while supporting their latest releases.

This lesson explores ways in which certain videos of the early MTV era involve a manipulation of gender norms. First, students study slides of advertising in order to detect the things—clothes, haircuts, postures, body types—that we perceive as “masculine” and “feminine.” Students then view slides of Rock artists from the 1970s and attempt to identify the ways in which they do or do not mix gender symbols. By viewing and discussing clips from Soundbreaking Episode Seven, as well an archival excerpt from Rolling Stone magazine, students then learn about the launch of MTV and the ways in which bands from divergent genres, such as Mötley Crüe and The Eurythmics, used the visual nature of the channel to present unexpected takes on masculinity and femininity. Finally, students consider the power of the music video in current culture by discussing the portrayals of femininity in a clip of Beyoncé Knowle's visual album of 2013, Beyoncé.
Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):
   • How ideas of “masculinity” and “femininity” are constructed through visual symbols
   • What many of the symbols that construct ideas of “masculinity” and “femininity” are
   • How advertising uses symbols of “masculinity” and “femininity”
   • How male Rock artists embraced symbols of “femininity” in their performances
   • How the rise of MTV created a visual space in which both male and female musicians challenged established notions of “masculinity” and “femininity”

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):
   • Assess visual images and analyze their cultural power
   • Evaluate the effects of visual technology on history and culture
   • Evaluate how television shows reflect and influence the values and norms of the society in which they are shown
   • Draw connections among and between various print, audio and visual texts
   • Relate changes in fashion and appearance to changes in world events and popular culture
   • Integrate and evaluate information presented in visual, oral and audio formats

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:
1. Make a T Chart on the board and label one side “female” and the other side “male.” Now display Slide 1, a picture of the dolls Barbie and Ken. Ask your students:
   • Which is the male doll and which is the female?
   • Why do you know this?
   • Let’s make a list on the board of all the things we perceive as either “male” or “female” about Barbie and Ken (Your students will likely point out hair and clothes first. Encourage them to dig deeper and think about the position and posture of the two dolls, their names, etc.)
MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: (CONTINUED)

2. Now show Slide 2 and ask your students:

- Which is the man and which is the woman?
- Why are you sure?
- Let’s make a list of all the things we see as “male” or “female” in this picture.

3. The following slides will require less discussion and can be shown more quickly. Show Slide 3, a clothing advertisement and ask your students:

- Is this a man or woman? What do you see in this picture that makes you sure?

4. Now show Slide 4, a Maybelline advertisement, and ask the same question:

5. Now show Slide 5, without telling your students that it is a picture of Rock performer David Bowie. Ask your students:
MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: (CONTINUED)

- Is this a man or woman?
- Why do you think so?
- Is there any markers of gender here that disrupt the lists we made above?

6. Show Slide 6, without telling your students it is musician and producer Brian Eno, and ask:

- Is this a man or woman?
- Why do you think so?
- Is there any markers of gender here that disrupt the lists we made above?

7. Show Slide 7, without telling your students that it is Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones in 1971, and ask:

- Do you think this performer is a man or a woman? Why?
- Are there any markers of gender here that disrupt the lists we made above?

8. In summary, ask your students:

- How do the images of David Bowie, Brian Eno and Mick Jagger in the 1970s contrast with the other images you saw?
- In what ways do you think Rock and Roll performance venues, as places to present gender, were different from most “mainstream” public spaces? (Encourage students to imagine Eno, Bowie or Jagger showing up to work in an office environment in the 1970s dressed as they are above.)
MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: (CONTINUED)

9. Now show slides 8 and 9, photos of Stevie Nicks and Linda Ronstadt from the 1970s and ask your students:

- Do you think that women in the world of Rock had a similar opportunity to defy expected gender norms in the 1970s? (Encourage your students to see that while male Rock stars comfortably embraced femininity as part of a stage persona, the privilege was largely theirs alone.)

PROCEDURE:

1. Remind your students of the photo of David Bowie they viewed in the Motivational Activity and show Clip 1, Soundbreaking - Bowie and Rock and Roll Characters. Ask your students:

- In what ways do you think David Bowie has created “characters” throughout this clip? Look back at Slide 5, do you think Bowie was “in character” in the photo above?
- In what ways could you say David Bowie was an “early explorer” of gender?
- In this clip Jason King suggests that David Bowie “radicalized masculinity” and changed the possibilities for “how men can stylistically express themselves in popular music.” In what ways do you see this happening in this clip or the photo above?

2. Ask your students if they ever watch MTV. Inform them that MTV launched on August 1, 1981 and, at the time played music videos almost exclusively. Previously, music had been featured on various variety shows and short programs, but MTV was the first dedicated music channel and it became enormously popular. Ask your students:

- In what ways do you think MTV differed from radio?
- In what ways do you think making music videos requires different skills from making albums?

3. Now show Clip 2, Soundbreaking - The Early Videos of MTV and ask your students:

- How did MTV pick the videos that it played in its earliest years? (Students should recall that, mostly, MTV played what it was given; there were not enough videos to choose from for the station to reject many.)
- What impact does this seem to have had on the content? (Encourage your students to recognize that MTV was open to most anything; since there was little existing material, more obscure performers could make music videos and have them played.)

4. Break students into small groups and distribute Handout 1 - 1984 Rolling Stone Excerpt. Inform students that the excerpt they will read describes some of the effects MTV has had on the music industry in the
three years since its launch. Have each group read the text and follow the response prompts on the handout. When the groups have finished, discuss the following as a class:

• In what ways do you think MTV enabled a market for bands like Mötley Crüe and Poison to emerge?

• Which images did you mark as “masculine” and which did you mark as “feminine”?

• Are there any images that some people or groups marked “masculine” but others marked “feminine”? What do you think this says about gender and images?

• Do you think that the “gender” of an item—shoes, clothes, etc.—is permanently fixed? (Encourage your students to recognize that inanimate items have no gender. For example, high heeled shoes were initially created for men to wear on horseback and considered “masculine.”)

• If separated from our ideas about who uses them, and when and how they do, do you think there is anything inherently “masculine” or “feminine” about clothing? About colors? Why or why not? Use specific examples.

5. Tell your students that, in contrast to the Rock world of the 1970s in which “gender play” was limited primarily to male artists such as David Bowie and Brian Eno, the format of early MTV created space not just for Heavy Metal, but spaces in which some female artists experimented as well. Show Clip 3, Soundbreaking - Annie Lennox on Using the Music Video and ask your students:

• In what ways do you think Lennox’s decision to wear her hair short put her “at odds with society”? What do you think she might have felt was expected of her?

• Why do you think Lennox suggests that wearing a suit was her attempt to be equal with her bandmate Dave Stewart? In what ways might a suit be able to suggest equality?

6. Show your students Slide 10, a photo of the Eurythmics and ask:

• Think back the lists you’ve made of “masculine” and “feminine” things throughout this lesson. In what ways has Lennox broken with gendered expectations in this photo?

• In what ways do you think Lennox’s decision to wear a suit might be part of a movement begun by male artists like Bowie and Eno a decade earlier?

• In what ways do you think the Eurythmics might have been aided by the visual campaign enabled by MTV?

7. Tell your students that artists such as Annie Lennox helped begin a conversation about gender that prefigured current explorations of the meaning of “gender” itself. MTV was an important platform to inspire those discussions, and though it still exists, there seem to be infinite outlets for music videos now. Recently, several artists have expanded the idea of the music video and released complete “visual albums.” Like Lennox’s videos, the 2013 visual album released by Beyoncé Knowles uses imagery to question issues of gender. Show Clip 4, Soundbreaking - Beyoncé’s Visual Album and have your students take notes about the various images of “femininity” they see in the clip. Ask your students:

• In what ways does Beyoncé present “femininity” in this video?

• Do you think that the “femininity” presented here is “natural” or something these women must strive to achieve? Why?
PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

- Does it seem like the women here are happy with their pursuit of “femininity”? Why?
- Why do you think Beyoncé includes the scene in which she smashes trophies won at beauty pageants? What do you think she might be suggesting here?
- In what ways do you think the statements made in Beyoncé’s and Lennox’s videos are similar or different?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Ask your students:

- Overall, how has popular music provided an arena in which musicians can experiment with the cultural boundaries of gender?
- In what ways would you suggest the heightened focus on the visual brought about in the era of MTV and carried into the present has affected this experimentation?
- Are there any other contemporary artists who you see experimenting with gender in their videos? Who, and what are they doing? Can you make any connections between this artist’s work and those who we’ve just discussed?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY:

Short Essay: Gender and Rock in the 21st Century

In 2016 the legislature of the state of North Carolina passed House Bill 2, known as “HB2” or, more colloquially, the “Bathroom Bill.” Though HB2 is a multi-faceted bill, it has drawn attention mostly for certain elements of legislation it contains that pertain to the rights of people who identify as transgender. Reaction to the law was swift from both sides, and some of the most vociferous opposition, both verbal and in action, has come from Rock musicians. Bruce Springsteen, The Beatles’ Ringo Starr, and Pearl Jam canceled North Carolina concerts in protest. Mumford and Sons, Cyndi Lauper and Duran Duran all still performed in North Carolina, but included activism as part of their shows and donated proceeds to pro-LGBT organizations.

Write a short essay that addresses the following:

- What is the North Carolina HB2 law?
- Why does HB2 anger the LGBT community?
- Why do citizens support HB2?
- Research the statements released by Rock acts in opposition to HB2:
- Why do they oppose the bill?
- Are these acts openly gay or transgender?
EXTENSION ACTIVITY: (CONTINUED)

- How might you relate the disruptions of gender in early MTV videos to the conversations you see around HB2?
- What has changed in the mainstream understanding of gender?
- How would you define “gender” in 2016 and beyond?
- Considering all the research above, where do you stand on HB2?
- Do you see a path forward in which the LGBT community and those in support of HB2 could reach a compromise?

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational Text

Reading 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

College and Career Readiness Writing Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

Writing 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Writing 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Speaking and Listening 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language for Grades 6-12

Language 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.
SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture
Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change
Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators’ and/or performers’ expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES
• Soundbreaking – Annie Lennox On Using Music Video
• Soundbreaking – Bowie and Rock and Roll Characters
• Soundbreaking – Beyoncé’s Visual Album
• Soundbreaking – The Early Videos of MTV

HANDOUTS
• Handout 1: 1984 Rolling Stone Excerpt