

Cathode Mamma: Post-punk and Television in Italy

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Abstract

Spanning from the late 1970s throughout the 1980s, the music-based subculture known as post-punk was characterized by an antagonistic attitude towards mass media and pop culture. This resulted frequently in acts of appropriation and parody, conducted through a multidisciplinary set of visual and performative forms of artistic expression that were complementary to music, namely film, video, performance, fashion, design and marketing. Borrowing tactics from historical and post-war avant-gardes – from Futurism to Situationism – and in line with the postmodernist ethos of such movements as the Pictures Generation, one of post-punk's recurring targets was television, blamed for its power to produce clichés with which viewers identified. While much has been written on American and British post-punk, little is known on peripheral scenes where this subculture assumed specific traits. This paper focuses on Italian post-punk and its unique 'response' to the epochal passage in Italy from state television to a privately owned, diversified, commercial mediascape. Although rooted in the 1977 counterculture, which harshly criticized mass media, Italian post-punk developed an ambiguous relationship with television, shifting from critique to complicity. For some, TV was the subject of sonic and visual parodies; for others, those who embraced the music video form, it became a useful medium. The paper reconstructs the cultural milieu of Italian post-punk in parallel with the diffusion of commercial television.

The Post-punk Gesamtkunstwerk and The Early Case of Krisma

Whereas the punk movement that arose in the late 1970s was characterized by a spontaneous, fiery and rude attitude against authority and the status quo, post-punk, which developed right after punk and throughout the 1980s, distinguished itself for its avant-garde sensibility based on a self-conscious, at times even programmatic attempt to reimagine the codes of individual expression and social behaviour. Centred on music, the post-punk subculture included also a diverse and multidisciplinary array of visual and performative forms of artistic expression, notably moving images, hybrid types of performance, visual communication and

fashion design. Articulated in various subgenres (e.g. new wave, no wave, mutant disco, punk-funk, cold wave, goth, industrial, EBM, synthpop, minimal synth, new romantics etc.), post-punk sound and lyrics were evidently unable, alone, to fulfil the need for self-expression felt by the generation that came of age at that time, during an era marked by the rise of neoliberalism and the early proliferation of affordable, electronic technology.

Borrowing tactics and signs from both historical and post-war avant-gardes – Dadaism, Futurism, Situationism and Fluxus immediately come to mind – and in line with the postmodernist ethos of coeval art movements such as the Pictures Generation, the post-punk artists, filmmakers, performers and designers took advantage of music to develop forms of *Gesamtkunstwerk* that offered youth new perspectives from which to face reality. Music critic Simon Reynolds has highlighted the conceptual dimension of post-punk in his seminal book on the movement, as when he asserted:

On a mission and fully in the now, post-punk created a thrilling sense of urgency. The new records came thick and fast, classic after classic. Even the incomplete experiments and interesting failures carried a powerful utopian charge and contributed to an exhilarating collective conversation. Certain groups existed more on the level of an idea than a fully realized proposition, but nonetheless made a difference just by existing and talking a good game in the press.¹

In 1987, when post-punk was coming to an end, two books, curiously published by the same English publisher, Methuen, acknowledged the major influence that the art school education played on many rock musicians from the 1960s: Simon Frith and Howard Horne's *Art into Pop* and John Walker's *Cross-Overs: Art into Pop/Pop into Art*. 'Art-school trained musicians took ingredients from the avant-garde but changed the recipe', wrote Frith and Horne, and 'stirred Pop art ideas too – what we got was not art vs. commerce, but commerce as art, as the canvas for the musician's creativity, individuality, style'.² The history of rock is certainly also a history of image but 'art rock', the term these authors employed, is a much more hybrid phenomenon. By applying to music and its marketing, processes based on originality, experimentation and critical thinking learned in art schools, art rockers broke down, once and for all, the ideological dichotomy between high and low culture on which modernism relied. If in the modernist era the avant-garde defined itself in opposition to popular culture, now pop culture was embraced unapologetically, as an arena in which to develop metalinguistic discourses.

The conceptual nature of post-punk emerges clearly from its deconstructionist approach to mass media codes and clichés. Television, in particular, was often the target of acts of appropriation and parody, blamed for its subliminal

¹ Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Post-punk 1978–1984* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), pp. 10–11.

² Simon Frith and Howard Horne, *Art into Pop* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 65.

Cathode Mamma: Post-punk and Television in Italy

power to elicit political consensus and induce consumerism. The multimedia production of bands such as Devo and Talking Heads in US, and Cabaret Voltaire and Psychic TV in the UK, is representative of post-punk's alignment with postmodernist thinking, which for what regards television is epitomized in Jean Baudrillard's idea of 'hyperreality', according to which television replaced reality with its *simulacrum*, not merely a copy of the real but a truth in its own right. While much has been written on American and British post-punk, little is known on peripheral scenes. A case in point is that of Italy, where the post-punk subculture developed a unique 'response' to the passage, that was epochal for the country, from the monopoly of state television Rai to a diversified, commercial mediascape. This allowed Silvio Berlusconi to establish his own media empire, Fininvest, and turn Italian television into a duopoly that, with some variations, still persists today.

Italian post-punk's relationship with television, which this article aims to map and explore, has been ambiguous, shifting over time from critique to complicity to autonomy. As a recurring subject of sonic and visual appropriations and parodies, for those who embraced the music video form, television also became the medium through which they developed metalinguistic forms of reflection. A quintessential case was that of Krisma – a duo composed of Maurizio Arcieri and Christina Moser, formerly known as Chrisma – who referred recurrently to TV in their lyrics, visual identity and music videos, but also made countless TV appearances, collaborated on TV programs and at some point even ran a TV channel. Their early thoughts on TV are summed up in the title-track of their 1980 album *Cathode Mamma*, whose lyrics state: 'I like television sets because they have voices for when you are alone [...]. Cathode mamma kiss me, in my cable paradise [...]. I like television sets. They fill my empty rooms with electronic stone [...]. They never go to sleep but glitter through the night [...] They always stay at home and keep my bed so warm'.³

Krisma's song describes the TV set as a maternal presence in the home, able to keep company to the lonely viewer as if it was a real person. The 7-inch record cover, conceived by visionary art director Mario Convertino, shows seven flows of TV sets, each broadcasting an image of Christina, dropping down from the letters that form the band's name and disappearing into a dark void (fig. 1a). Portraits of the musicians taken from a TV screen appear on the cover of the album and the popular single *Many Kisses* (fig. 1b, 1c). The duo had already played with similar issues in 1979, via the 16mm promo for the song *Aurora B.* – when they still went by the name of Chrisma – directed by Sergio Attardo, which in fact could be considered one of the earliest 'music videos' ever produced in Italy. Scenes of the two in erotic moments that end with Maurizio's attempted suicide alternate with scenes of Christina in a dark room, singing behind TV sets that transmit her live image, while another one broadcasts the footage of a

³ Krisma, *Cathode Mamma*, Polydor 1980, lyrics of the song retrieved from http://krisma.mayancaper.net/records/lyrics_cathode.html [accessed 12 December 2019].

Francesco Spampinato

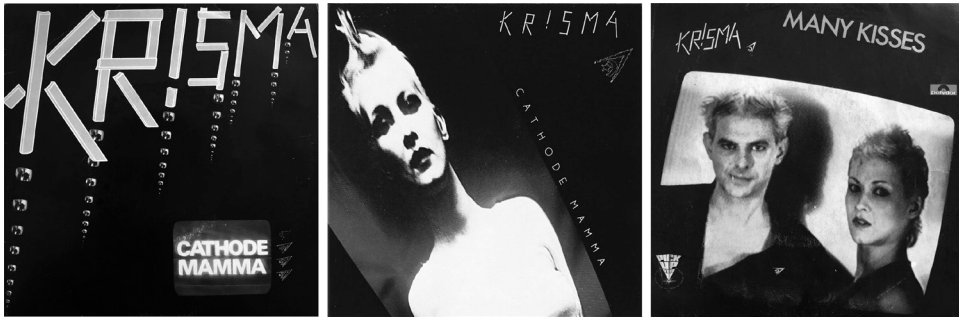


Fig. 1a, 1b, 1c: Krisma, record covers. From left: *Cathode Mamma* (7"); *Cathode Mamma* (LP); *Many Kisses* (7"). Polydor, 1980. Design: Mario Convertino.



Fig. 2: Chrisma, *Aurora B.*, 1979, 16 mm, 4'52", Color.
Producer: Polydor. Director: Sergio Attardo.

Formula 1 incident, before setting on the Rai test pattern that appeared on the screen when no programming was broadcast, usually at night (fig. 2).

Post-1977 Bologna: Gaznevada, Grabinsky and the Stupid Set

Television was a major issue for various bands that emerged from Bologna, where Italian post-punk was literally born from the ashes of the movement of 1977, made of students and left-wing extra-parliamentary groups who demanded direct action. The reference points that allowed the birth of post-punk in Bologna were: the experimental university major in DAMS (Disciplines of Art, Music and Spectacle), the yearly Performance Week festival, the creative squat

Cathode Mamma: Post-punk and Television in Italy



Fig. 3: Gaznevada, *Telepornovisione*, 1980, video, 7'35", b/w.
Producer: Italian Records. Director: Grabinsky. Courtesy: Oderso Rubini.

Traumfabrik, the pirate radio station Radio Alice, the music venue Punkreas, the record store Disco d'Oro, and Oderso Rubini's record label Harpo's Music, which later became Italian Records. Many people who gravitated around this network had been involved in the 1977 riots, culminating in the 'Conference Against Repression'. The event featured a performance by Bolognese punk band Centro d'Urlo Metropolitano (the 'Center for Metropolitan Screams'), whose song *Mamma Dammi la Benza* ('Mom Gimme Fuel'), with its indomitable pace and allusion to the Molotov bomb, became a late anthem of the uprising.

Rechristened Gaznevada, the group's earliest commentary on television was *Teleporno T.V.* (1979), a noise composition in line with the style of industrial music built around the still punk refrain: 'posso fare il guardone con la mia *telepornovisione*' ('I can be a voyeur with my *telepornovisione*'). The song referred to those TV channels that used to broadcast pornographic content, but also the diffusion of CCTV in public spaces, as emerges in the music video directed by Grabinsky (Emanuele Angiuli, Renato De Maria and Walter Mamei), a group of videomakers also from Bologna. This shows a guy who tunes a TV set to the live images of a couple in intimate moments (fig. 3). Austrian scholar Klemens Gruber has noted that a trope for the 1977 *intelligentsia* was 'the relationship between the artistic avant-garde and mass media: two snakes who devour each other. The importance of media for a cultural transformation and the actuality of the historical avant-garde, submitted to the conditions of the information society, become determinant fields for their explorations'.⁴

As police repression, that resulted in the murder of student Francesco Lorusso, and some rioters' sympathies for the terrorist group the Red Brigades brought the movement to an end, the 1980 deadly bomb attack on the Bologna train station and the diffusion of heroin signalled the beginning of a new phase of cultural opposition to the dominant order. Unlike Radio Alice, a model of media autonomy at the core of the 1977 movement, which is the focus of Gruber's study, Gaznevada and Grabinsky developed a critical commentary on mass media from within a culture of commodities, namely the record industry, albeit

⁴ Klemens Gruber, *L'Avanguardia Inaudita: Comunicazione e Strategie nei Movimenti degli Anni Settanta* (1989), trans. by Elfi Reiter (Genoa: Costa & Nolan, 1997), p. 16 (my translation).

Francesco Spampinato

one that was extremely 'DIY'. Gaznevada referred to TV again on the cover of the single *Nevadagaz* (1980), the first of Italian Records' releases, designed by Anna Persiani after inputs from the band's members, showing fading portraits taken off a TV screen (fig. 4), and the B-side song *Blue TV Set*. TV screens broadcasting musicians are the leitmotiv of the covers of their 1985 album *Back to the Jungle* and single *Living in the Jungle*, but at that point the band had already shifted towards a cheesy Italo disco style, a move that was harshly criticized by their early punk and post-punk aficionados (fig. 5).



Fig. 4: Gaznevada, record cover (front and back): *Nevadagaz* (7"), Italian Records, 1980. Design: Anna Persiani. Courtesy: Oderso Rubini.



Fig. 5: Gaznevada, record covers. From left: *Back to the Jungle* (LP); *Back to the Jungle* (7"). Both EMI, 1985. Illustration (LP): Kenji Sumura.

Cathode Mamma: Post-punk and Television in Italy

Meanwhile, two of Gaznevada's original members, Giampiero Huber and Giorgio Lavagna, had formed the band and multimedia project Stupid Set. In the hilarious music video of *Hello, I Love You* (1981), a cover of a famous song by the Doors, directed by Grabinsky, the musicians are filmed as they perform the song inside an empty room, with TV sets in the place of their heads, broadcasting static and their zoomed in mouths (fig. 6). For the Stupid Set, Grabinsky realized also the *Tape Show* (1980), a wall of twenty TV sets, sponsored by Philips,

Fig. 6: Stupid Set, *Hello, I Love You*, 1981, video, 3'10", Color.
Producer: Italian Records.
Director: Grabinsky.
Courtesy: Oderso Rubini.

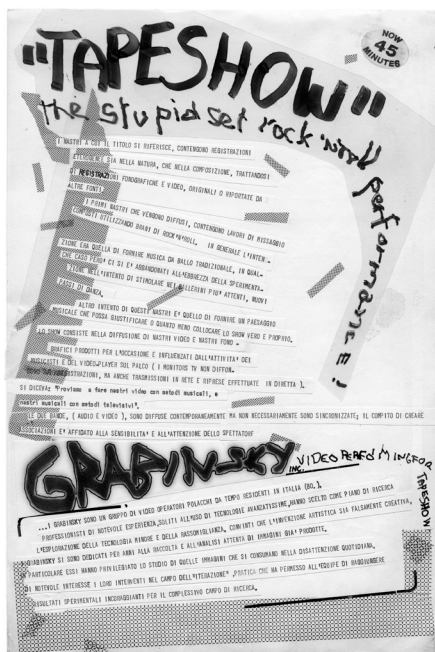


Fig. 7: Stupid Set and Grabinsky, *Tape Show*, collage for the flyer, 1980.
Design: Giampiero Huber and Giorgio Lavagna. Courtesy: Oderso Rubini.

Francesco Spampinato

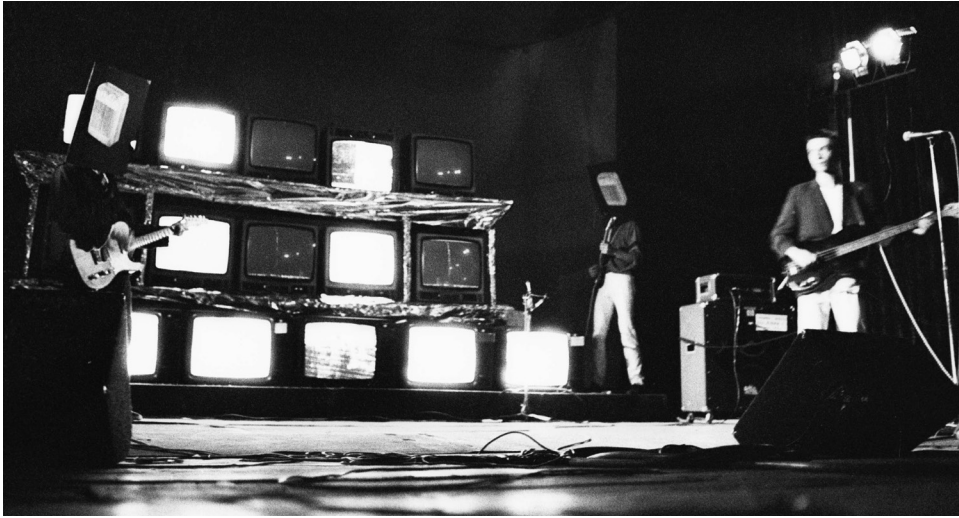


Fig. 8: Stupid Set and Grabinsky, *Tape Show*, performance and set, IV International Performance Week, Bologna, 1980. Producer: Italian Records. Performance: Stupid Set. Set Design: Grabinsky. Courtesy: Oderso Rubini.



Fig. 9: Stupid Set and Grabinsky, *Tape Show*, performance and set, IV International Performance Week, Bologna, 1980. Producer: Italian Records. Performance: Stupid Set. Set Design: Grabinsky. Courtesy: Oderso Rubini.

Cathode Mamma: Post-punk and Television in Italy



Fig. 10: Grabinsky, *Tape Show*, 1980, video, b/w.
Producer: Italian Records. Courtesy: Emanuele Angiuli.

broadcasting cut-up footage from popular TV series such as *Hulk* and *Columbo*, used as a backdrop of a live show by the band in Bologna's Piazza Maggiore (figg. 7, 8, 9). The *Tape Show* was also featured in the city's fourth edition of the 'Performance Week', when the group added toy instruments to their equipment. With a montage based on abrupt juxtapositions and obsessive loops, the *Tape Show* echoes the allegorical procedures of some American visual artists associated to the Pictures Generation, such as Jack Goldstein and Dara Birnbaum, and notably the latter's video *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978) (fig. 10). Employing TV sets on stage became a kind of trend at that time; other Italian post-punk bands that did so were Pale TV (who also referred to TV with their own name and in their 1981 song *B/W Television Shock-Show*) from Parma and Scortilla from Genoa.

The Stupid Set invoked television again in the song *Basset*, the B-side of the 12-inch *Soft Parade* (Mmmh Records, 1981), based on a text recited over the audio of an episode of the TV series *Hunter*. The group's ultimate project on TV was *Soul of Trade*, recorded in 1980–1981 but released only in 2015 by Spittle Records: a series of sound compositions that were supposed to be performed within another multimedia installation. Equally inspired by the Residents' deconstructionist parodies of muzak and William S. Burroughs' cut-up technique, as it emerges from his seminal book *The Electronic Revolution* (Berlin: Expanded Media Editions, 1970), the project was based on 'the use of video/audio recordings of commercials and newscasts', to be employed 'as harmonic material for some pop songs'.⁵ For the live show, the group had envisioned a performance from behind a Venetian blind onto which TV footage and slides would be projected, while a CCTV system would transmit the live images of the performers on two TV sets in the apron.

The Stupid Set's interest in the subliminal nature of mass media and the automation implied in 'video/audio recordings' and editing techniques is also at the centre of their last project, which was presented at the 1982 'Contaminazioni' festival in Bologna. *Psychodisco* consists in a series of cut-up compositions

⁵ The Stupid Set, 'The Silent Generation (nota privata)', undated text appearing in the liner notes of the vinyl release of *Soul of Trade* (Milan: Spittle Records, 2015), unpagged.

Francesco Spampinato

based on appropriated samples (recorded in 1982 but this one too released only in 2015 by Opilec Music), paired with a video directed by band's member Umberto Lazzari. Less a music video than a video art project in its own right, the 34-minute amalgam contains: illustrations of Maya gods; pixelated animations (i.e. a deserted landscape with a cactus and a buffalo skull, a skyline, and a guy watching TV at home) made with a Commodore 64 computer by Francesco Chiarini; and footage recorded by Lazzari from Dutch and Italian television: mostly commercials featuring children smiling, eyes blinking, a choreography of women on a beach, and fragments typical of the iconography of ads for household products (fig. 11).

The Rise of Music Videos: The Peculiar Case of Mister Fantasy

The music video is usually intended as a short promo film for TV that integrates a song with imagery, whose birth could be situated around the mid 1970s. According to the writer Pier Vittorio Tondelli – who has acknowledged the innovative impact of Italian post-punk culture in many of his writings – this peculiar type of media genre soon evolved ‘from a simple means of distribution and promotion of an album to a product [...] that recalls the avant-gardes’ old dream of total art: cinema, music, theatre, poetry, computer art that interact in



Fig. 11: Stupid Set, Pyschodisco, 1982, video, 34', Color. Director: Umberto Lazzari. Courtesy: Oderso Rubini.



Fig. 12: Carlo Massarini in the TV studio of Mister Fantasy, Rai 1, 1981.
Design: Mario Convertino.

the space of a few minutes'.⁶ As this was evident for Grabinsky's production and Lazzari's video of *Psychodisco*, which circulated in art circles and clearly aligned with that of contemporary experimental filmmakers and visual artists working with video, performance and installation, it was less immediate for Attardo's film for Chrisma's *Aurora B.* (1979), because this was made expressly for TV, which is rarely considered a context in which artistic forms of critical thinking are experimented. This preconception changed with the arrival of *Mister Fantasy* on Rai 1, the first Italian TV program to be exclusively dedicated to music videos, which debuted on May 1981, three months before the launch of MTV in the U.S.

Conceived by TV producer Paolo Giaccio and hosted by Carlo Massarini, the program developed a distinct postmodernist style based on effects of fragmentation and pastiche thanks to the space-age studio, Convertino's videographics, and the music videos directed by a roster of emerging practitioners (fig. 12). Massarini defined *Mister Fantasy*'s studio without audience a 'hyperspace [...] empty, aseptic, out of time and space'.⁷ Strictly related to Baudrillard's idea of 'hyperreality', the concept of 'hyperspace' was theorized by Fredric Jameson,

⁶ Pier Vittorio Tondelli, 'Videosexy', *Alter Alter*, 6 (June 1984), p. 28 [repr. in Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Un Weekend Postmoderno. Cronache dagli anni Ottanta* (Milan: Bompiani, 1990)], pp. 218–219).

⁷ Carlo Massarini, 'Il Fantasy Lessico. L'Iperspazio è Abitato da Creature della Notte', *Segnocinema*, 8 (May 1983), p. 26 [reprinted in *MTV. Il Nuovo Mondo della Televisione*, ed. by Domenico Baldini (Rome: Castelvecchi, 2000), p. 174].

another key postmodernist thinker, as a space that transcends ‘the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surrounding perceptually’, and that for this reason is a symbol of ‘the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects’.⁸ As a hyperspace, *Mister Fantasy* epitomized the process of media integration that television entailed and its alienating and disorienting effects.

Active until 1984, in its 100 episodes the program featured also 80 original music videos produced in-house, alongside music videos mainly from the US and the UK. Although these were mostly made for Italian pop singers and songwriters, and a handful of post-punk acts, *Mister Fantasy* was not only responsible for bringing the post-punk aesthetics to TV: inspired by the post-punk *milieu*, it also manufactured a postmodernist *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the form of a commercial product. This, however, had a double effect: while challenging the language of TV, it also helped to reinforce its persuasive power. Indeed, on the one hand *Mister Fantasy* broke with traditional notions of media entertainment and turned mainstream television into a context for artistic expression and experimental communication. On the other, the program exemplified what Umberto Eco called ‘Neo-Television’, a new type of television that emerged in the 1980s, which was self-referential, based on an obsessive audiovisual flow, the juxtaposition of different layers of communications and, precisely, the convergence of various media.⁹

At the core of Neo-TV, as media scholar Gianni Sibilla argues, the music video is based on a kaleidoscopic merging of various elements and ‘is aware of its role, its position within the music and audiovisual context and does not miss the opportunity to expose its proper communication modes’.¹⁰ Interestingly enough, some music videos produced by *Mister Fantasy* adopted self-referentiality as a deconstructionist tactic as in the case of the 1982 video trilogy realized for Krisma’s songs, by a team that included the video directors Piccio Raffanini and Attardo, the photographer Edo Bertoglio, and the art director Convertino. Filmed in Bali, the trilogy opens with the *Miami* video, based on a scene with Maurizio wondering on a paradise beach, armed and threatening, intercut with flashes of a TV set tuned to the new-born channel Rete 4 broadcasting the Vietnam War movie *The Soldier’s Story* (Ian McLeod, 1981) (fig. 13). The anti-war ethos, based on the dichotomy beauty/cruelty, persists in the videos of *Water* and *Samora Club*, where Christina’s glamour clashes with the shadows of

⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 44.

⁹ Umberto Eco, ‘TV: Transparency Lost’ (1983) in *Telegen: Art and Television*, trans. and ed. by Dieter Daniels and Stephan Berg (Munich: Himer Verlag GmbH, 2015), pp. 207-218.

¹⁰ Gianni Sibilla, *Musica da Vedere. Il Videoclip nella Televisione Italiana* (Rome: RAI – ERI, 1999), p. 43 (my translation).

Cathode Mamma: Post-punk and Television in Italy

a submarine in the first, and of Maurizio in military attire and anxious to use his knife in the latter (figg. 14, 15).

Along with this explicit anti-war reading, another interpretation emerges: in manufacturing a hyperreality based on criteria of entertainment and advertising, television desensitizes its audience regarding the world's real problems such as war, notably the Cold War that was ongoing at that time, while producing

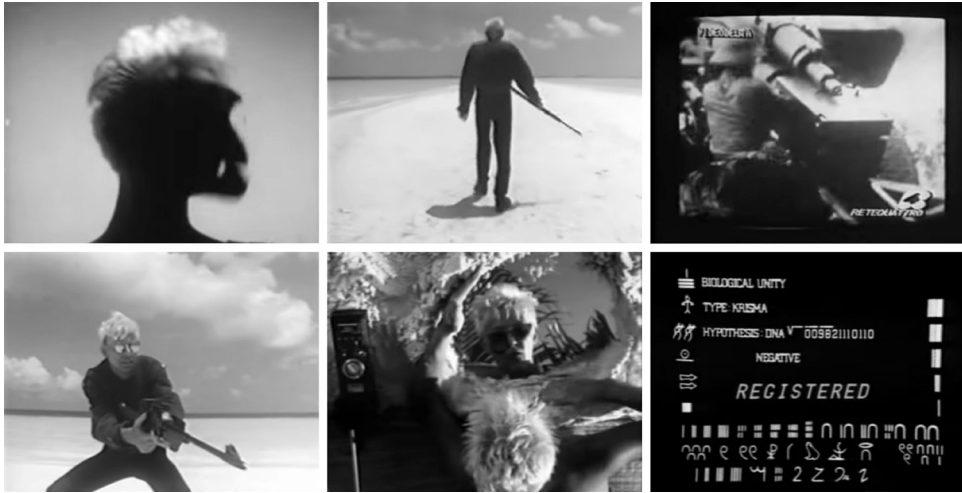


Fig. 13: Krisma, *Miami*, 1982, video, 3'57", Color.

Producer: Mister Fantasy, Rai 1. Directors: Piccio Raffanini and Sergio Attardo. Photography: Edo Bertoglio. Art Director: Mario Convertino.



Fig. 14: Krisma, *Water*, 1982, video, 4'25", Color.

Producer: Mister Fantasy, Rai 1. Directors: Piccio Raffanini and Sergio Attardo. Photography: Edo Bertoglio. Art Director: Mario Convertino.

Francesco Spampinato



Fig. 15: Krisma, *Samora Club*, 1982, video, 3'25", Color.

Producer: Mister Fantasy, Rai 1. Directors: Piccio Raffanini and Sergio Attardo. Photography: Edo Bertoglio. Art Director: Mario Convertino.

subtle forms of propaganda. By juxtaposing original scenes with TV footage and Convertino's infographics, exposing elements of the backstage (e.g. a backdrop) and playing on the ambiguity between reality and its double (e.g. the shadows), this trilogy elicits a metalinguistic reflection on the media's power to manipulate reality. *Mister Fantasy* produced also the video for Krisma's *I'm Not in Love* (1984), directed by Giancarlo Bocchi, although this was less concerned with television per se than the propaganda of totalitarian regimes at large. Along with Krisma, the only other 'proper' post-punk act featured in the program was Garbo. Out of the three music videos produced for him by Mister Fantasy, the one for *Radioclima* (1984), directed by Raffanini, is characterized by the presence of radios and TV sets, alluded to as media able to produce stereotypes with which the audience unwillingly identifies.

Less post-punk than pop, but similarly interested in facing issues of media representation and influence through visuals and performance, is the video for Matia Bazar's *Il Video Sono Io* (*I Am the Video*, 1983), this one too directed by Raffanini. In line with the geometrical set designed by postmodernist design group Alchimia co-founded by Alessandro Mendini, the musicians perform a theatrical choreography based on mechanical moves. The highlight is the presence of six totems, each made of four piled TV sets, which alternate the face with the fractured full-length figure of the glamorous singer Antonella Ruggiero (fig. 16). Loosely labelled 'videosculture', this peculiar mode of display was employed at that time by artists such as Friederike Pezold and Studio Azzurro to allegorize how media can fragment the viewer's subjectivity. Andy Warhol's film *Outer and Inner Space* (1966) also comes to mind, but unlike Edie Sedgwick, who tries to

Cathode Mamma: Post-punk and Television in Italy



Fig. 16: Matia Bazar, *Il Video Sono Io*, 1983, video, 2'40", Color. Producer: Mister Fantasy, Rai 1. Director: Piccio Raffanini. Set Design: Alchimia.

get hold of her media duplicate, Antonella, like Christina in Chrisma's *Aurora B.*, seems disinterested in interacting with her double; self-confident and in control, their media image coincides with their own selves.

The Italian Post-punk Music Video

Examples such as these prove that the music video could not only challenge the modernist dogma, according to which art is defined by the fact of being displayed in an artistic context and in opposition to popular culture, but that they could also trigger an even more radical deconstructionist effect than art, because it criticizes the media from within. This was not always the case of course. Indeed, most music videos have neither the ability nor the intention of challenging media and, as Dick Hebdige has written, they could 'be seen as a further congealment/commodification of "authentic" culture into "inauthentic" (packaged) product in a process which leads to the primacy of the televisual: the simulacrum'.¹¹ Interestingly, visual and performative forms of critical thinking

¹¹ Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 237.

in line with the visual arts are more often developed by people associated with the loosely-defined 'alternative' music genres, that is genres whose very existence is legitimated by being oppositional to the status quo. In this sense, being coincidental with the rise of music television, post-punk had a major responsibility in bringing procedures rooted in critical thinking from the arts to pop culture via the music video form.

Italy has always been at the forefront of the evolution of forms of convergence between music and moving images. As popular music was so ingrained in Italian culture, from its launch in 1954, Rai produced several programs in which music, visuals and performance converged, notably the live broadcast of the Sanremo music festival, as well as dozens of variety shows and short films. In the late 1950s the Società Internazionale Fonovisione produced the Cinebox, a coin-operated 16 mm film projector jukebox, which was sold worldwide and installed in public places like cafes, following in the footsteps of the Scopitone, its French precursor. The idea of pairing songs with a movie expanded into a film genre called 'musicarello', a type of musical movie that became highly popular in the 1960s. Italian music video scholars Domenico Baldini, Bruno Di Marino and Domenico Liggeri all dedicate considerable space to the evolution of the music video in Italy in their publications. However, aside for *Mister Fantasy* and Krisma, they fully ignore Grabinsky as well as the rest of the Italian post-punk videography.

Examples of post-punk music videos produced in Italy in the 1980s that deserve to be rediscovered and re-contextualized, within both the evolution of media and the arts, are: Tony Verità's video for Litfiba's *Dea del Fujiama* (1981); Toni Occhiello's for Doris Norton's *Psychoraptus* (1982); Corso Salani's for Litfiba's *Der Krieg* (Guerra, 1982); Giancarlo Onorato's for Underground Life's *La Tempesta* (1983); Alessandro Furlan's for Jo Squillo's *Bizarre* (1984); Paul Allman's for Ruins' *Fire!* (1984); Carlo Isola's for Neon's *Isolation* (1986); Metamorphosi's for Maurizio Marsico's *Mefisto Funk* and *Lovely Racers* (both 1986); Giovanotti Mondani Meccanici's for their own *Et Maintenant* (1986) and for Alexander Robotnik's *C'est la Vie* (1987); and Massimo Gasparini's for Plasticoast's *Canzone Dada* (1988). The Italian Records videos for Gaznevada's *Antistatico Shock* (1982), Hi-Fi Bros' *The Line* (1983), and N.O.I.A.'s *Do You Wanna Dance* (1984) are still uncredited. The same is true of those for KKD's *I Need Help* (1981), Frigidaire Tango's *Recall* and *Vanity Fair* (both 1983), Diaframma's *Siberia* (1984), and HAKKAH's *No Way Out* (1986). This is just a handful of music videos that returned to public attention thanks to the internet, uploaded by their directors, the bands or their fans, but hopefully more obscure examples are on the way.

Other music videos still offer commentaries on television and its subliminal power. Luca Setti and Marina Spada's video for Maurizio Marsico's *Frisk the Frog* (1982), at the crossroads of new wave, rap and Italo disco, whose lyrics have been written by comic artist Massimo Mattioli, alternates an Intellivision frog videogame with the soap-opera-styled scenes of a couple singing. The broken

Cathode Mamma: Post-punk and Television in Italy



Fig. 17: Maurizio Marsico, *Frisk the Frog*, 1982, video, 5'13", Color.
Directors: Luca Setti and Marina Spada. Photography: Toni Meneguzzo.



Fig. 18: Diaframma, *Altrove*, 1983, video, 5'22", Color.
Producer: Contempo Records. Director: Tony Verità.

narrative is punctuated by a TV set broadcasting images of a breakdancer in an empty room who, among other moves, mimes to push the TV screen from the inside as if trying to escape from a prison (fig. 17). Not so much hilarious as it is conceptual, Tony Verità's video for Diaframma's *Altrove* (1983) depicts the four band's members sitting motionless in a dark room, looking severely into the camera (fig. 18). In the background a TV set broadcasts an unidentified erotic

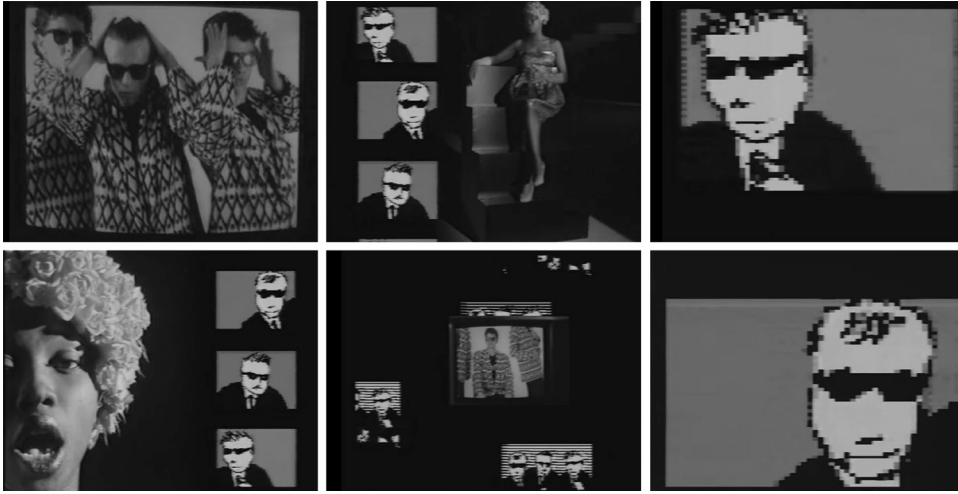


Fig. 19: GMM feat. Alexander Robotnik, *Don't Ask Me Why*, 1985, video, 3'15", Color.
 Producer: Materiali Sonori. Directors: Giovanotti Mondani Meccanici (GMM) and Studio Azzurro.

movie, illuminating the environment with its typical bluish luminescence. The four's impassive stillness is clearly an act of resistance to television and the very nature of the pop music video, which is traditionally based on lip-synching.

One more post-punk music video that refers to TV is that by multimedia collective Giovanotti Mondani Meccanici (GMM), directed in collaboration with the likeminded group Studio Azzurro, for *Don't Ask Me Why* (1985): a hybrid new wave/Italo disco track made by GMM with their associate Alexander Robotnik (fig. 19). The video juxtaposes the performance of the singer Irene N'Jie, images of the electronic alter egos of the three GMM – the notorious protagonists of various computer comics and video works – and of the three artists in trendy clothing and black sunglasses as they dance and struggle with finding the perfect pose in an empty room, a scene that is also broadcast by a TV set. The frenetic multiplication of these two types of images, media persona and electronic duplicates, ironizes on the effects of media's fragmentation of subjectivity. With its emphasis on collaboration and through references to media and the personal computer, the video tackle issues of depersonalization and anonymity in relation with media and information technologies, at the core of both GMM and Studio Azzurro's practice.

The Representation of Post-punk in Italian TV: A Search for Autonomy

During the 1980s the programs that featured music videos multiplied on both public and private TV channels in Italy, another highly popular one being *Deejay Television* (1983–1990) on Canale 5; like *Mister Fantasy*, this also produced in-

house music videos, mostly for Italo disco acts. Shortly after *Mister Fantasy* ended its transmissions, in the wake of MTV in the US, a proper music channel was launched. *Videomusic* (1984–1996) transmitted music videos, documentaries, live concerts, interviews all day long, with 8 minutes per hour of commercials. According to Baldini, only 200 music videos were produced in the whole decade of the 1980s by Italian record labels, while in US this was the number for one month.¹² It is not clear what are the sources Baldini uses for this data, nor how authoritative they are, but it is certainly true that this number does not include the post-punk music videos, which had an extremely low visibility on TV and sometimes, as in the case of Grabinsky, circulated only in art or experimental film and video festivals.

More than music videos, Italian post-punk became visible on TV through live performances. In 1982 Gaznevada put their reputation on the line by competing, unsuccessfully, in the selections for the populist Sanremo music festival on the family-oriented variety show *Domenica In*. Only the most pop-oriented post-punk acts performed in the media event of Sanremo: Garbo (1984) and Denovo (1988). Diaframma, Litfiba, Neon and Underground Life all performed at *L'Orecchiocchio* (1982–1986) on Rai 3, maintaining intact their credibility, like those featured in the *Mister Fantasy* documentaries on the scenes of Bologna and Pordenone or on Videomusic. Krisma and CCCP – Fedeli alla Linea performed on several generalist TV programs, injecting them with the threatening as much as appealing deviancy proper of the outsiders. A truthful, backstage image of Italian post-punk emerges from the documentary *L'Ultimo Concerto* (1984) directed by Piergiorgio Gay on Frigidaire Tango for Rai 1, which, as band member Carlo Casale has recounted, 'told the problems of an independent band, on the edge between the need to express their art and the conditional integration into a society that was becoming that monster thirsty for money, arrogance and power that distinguished the 1980s'.¹³

A quintessential representation of Italian post-punk identity can be found in *Pirata! Cult Movie* (1984), a low-budget film directed by Paolo Ciaffi Ricagno, featuring post-punk acts Art Fleury, Jo Squillo, Gaznevada and the Great Complotto (fig. 20). Set in a dystopian future, it tells the story of a 'pirate' on roller skates arising against the totalitarian regime of the 'Sognatore Supremo' (Supreme Dreamer), who enacts his power through television and a violent armed force. In the name of the 'video-negativi' (video-negatives), an obscure movement of resistance, the pirate steals the 'cappello dei sogni' (hat of the dreams) from the dictator; then is chased through Turin's foggy streets and nightlife venues by guards and his own mother. He eventually infiltrates the TV station from where whoever owns the hat can divulgate the dreams that keep the population under control. But as he tries to disrupt the system, he remains

¹² Domenico Baldini, *MTV. Il Nuovo Mondo della Televisione* (Rome: Castelvechi, 2000), p. 167.

¹³ Carlo Casale, 'Il Tango era nel Congelatore' in *Gli Altri Ottanta. Racconti dalla Galassia Post-Punk Italiana*, ed. by Livia Satriano (Milan: Agenzia X, 2015), p. 40.

Cathode Mamma: Post-punk and Television in Italy



Fig. 21: CCCP – Fedeli alla Linea, TV commercials for the release of the album *Canzoni Preghiere Danze del II Millennio – Sezione Europa*, 1989. Producer: Virgin Records.

Il Millennio – Sezione Europa (Virgin 1989), their label produced four sarcastic TV commercials for Videomusic, in which each of the band's members offers a hilarious parody of a promotional video, filmed in a studio that recalls that of a real TV newscast, merging a propaganda agenda with the style and language of TV news and shopping channels (fig. 21).

Although made in the late 1990s, way beyond the timespan discussed, two late projects by Krisma provide the ultimate examples of post-punk's deconstructionist approach to television. One was their nightly TV program *Sat Sat* (1995–1996) for Rai 3, made of chaotic cut-ups of various TV channels from across world. The other was the satellite channel *Krisma TV* (1998–2002), produced by Eutelsat Communications, made of live footage from the Cocoricò club in Riccione (where the duo worked as DJs) and disorienting loops of samples from a variety of sources, distorted through fisheye and other lysergic editing techniques, on a hypnotic techno soundtrack. After almost two decades, Krisma were finally able to establish their own *Cathode Mamma*. Interestingly enough, during the same timeframe a 'Supreme Dreamer' named Berlusconi expanded from the small TV channel Telemilano 58, which he had bought in 1978, to the three-channel empire Fininvest (later Mediaset) comprising Canale 5, Italia 1, and Rete 4. Through TV, Berlusconi developed impressive strategies of consensus-building, which he then applied to political marketing, forming the centre-right political party Forza Italia and eventually becoming Prime Minister for nine years between 1994 and 2011.

Berlusconi became a target for artistic and political resistance only in the 1990s. In retrospect, however, it is interesting to note how Italian post-punk's deconstructionist approach to television prophesized the risks implied in the

Francesco Spampinato

manipulation of mass media under neoliberalism. To this extent, Mark Fisher's considerations on Manchester band Joy Division, a quintessential incarnation of the post-punk ethos, are illuminating: 'Listen to JD now, and you have the inescapable impression that the group were catatonically challenging our present, their future. [...] It has become increasingly clear that 1979-1980, the years with which the group will always be identified, was a threshold moment – the time when a whole world (social, democratic, Fordist, industrial) became obsolete, and the contours of a new world (neoliberal, consumerist, informatic) began to show themselves'.¹⁵ The same is true, albeit with some variations, for Italian post-punk, whose schizophrenic relationship with television is symptomatic of how artistic forms of critical thinking were no longer exclusive domain of the visual arts but could be employed to dismantle mass media from within.

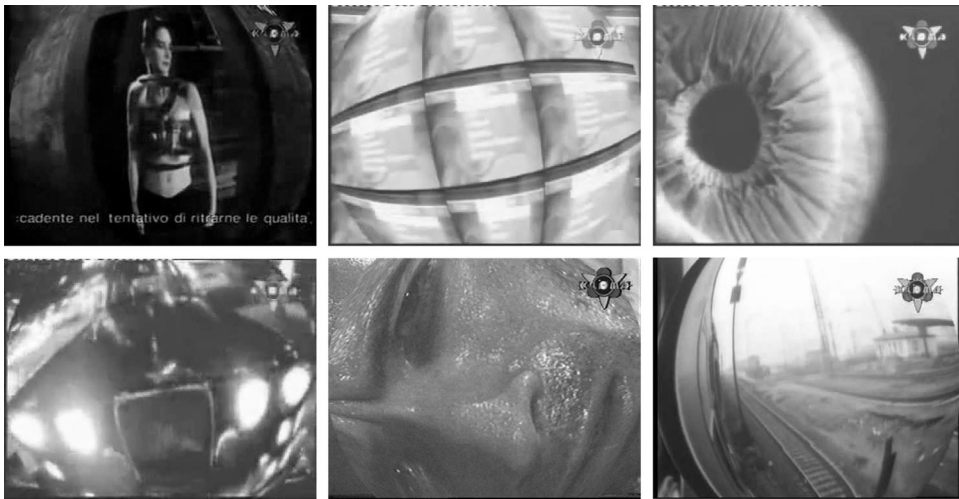


Fig. 22: Krisma, *Krisma TV*, 1998–2002. Stills from the satellite TV channel Krisma TV produced by Eutelsat Communications.

¹⁵ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (London: John Hunt Publishing, 2014), p. 50.