

Blinding Lights (The Weeknd): formal techniques and branded content in MTV's Video of the Year

Blinding Lights (The Weeknd): pautas formales y contenido de marca en el videoclip del año de MTV



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Abstract:

This research aims to provide a textual analysis of the *Blinding Lights* music video by The Weeknd, winner of Video of the Year 2020 at the MTV Video Music Awards. We have chosen this music video as a representative model of this format in the contemporary context. Our initial hypothesis is that MTV awarded this video because it prolongs classical and exemplary formal and narrative techniques, even conventional ones, despite the format's openness to formal experimentation. We intend through textual

Resumen:

Esta investigación tiene por objetivo principal el análisis textual del videoclip Blinding Lights de The Weeknd, premio a Vídeo del año 2020 en los galardones MTV Video Music Awards. Destacamos este vídeo como modelo representativo de las prácticas del formato en el contexto contemporáneo. Partimos de la hipótesis de que MTV premia un vídeo que prolonga prácticas formales y narrativas clásicas y modélicas, incluso convencionales, a pesar de la apertura del formato a la experimentación formal. Pretendemos a través

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analysis to discover the key elements of its formal construction. The application of a textual analysis on a single audio-visual work is a common application in music video studies. Textual analysis allows us to identify frequent techniques that appear in music video formats such as the variety of frames with a functional purpose, abundant camera movements, lack of continuity between shots, a weak narrative or the circular ordering of events, among others. In addition, *Blinding Lights* is a paradigmatic music video production due to its obvious commercial purpose, as part of a branded content strategy for Mercedes-Benz.

Keywords:

Music video; television; branded content; textual analysis; record industry.

del análisis textual descubrir las claves de su articulación formal, con un propósito divulgativo. La aplicación de un análisis textual sobre una sola obra audiovisual supone una aplicación habitual en los estudios sobre el videoclip. El análisis textual permite identificar aquí prácticas frecuentes en el formato: variedad de encuadres con un sentido funcional, abundantes movimientos de cámara, falta de continuidad entre planos, una débil narratividad o la ordenación circular de acontecimientos, entre otros. Además, Blinding Lights es paradigmático de la producción de videos musicales por su evidente finalidad comercial, como parte de una estrategia de branded content para la marca automovilística Mercedes-Benz.

Palabras clave:

Videoclip; televisión; contenido de marca; análisis textual; industria discográfica.

1. Introduction

In 1987 the British band Depeche Mode released their ironically entitled album 'Music For The Masses', aware that the electronic music they produced did not have the massive acceptance of rock and pop. Paradoxically, it became an unprecedented hit for the band, to the point that they performed live concerts, packing stadiums in the United States. Through this anecdote we want to introduce a complex issue: the conversion of apparently avant-garde cultural products and formal experimentation into products for popular and mass consumption. In the space where diverse artistic formats converge with commercial objectives, the music video, the object of our study, is a link between pure artistic creation and the open commercial nature of advertising.

Despite the difficulties involved in attempting to define the music video format (Sedeño-Valdellós, 2002; Viñuela, 2008; Vernallis, 2013), it has usually been understood as an audiovisual format with a formal nature linked to experimentation, exploration as a resource for cultural expression and the application of new filming and editing technologies, but it has also been considered as a tool with a commercial purpose. Audiovisual experimentation is thus less important than its commercial purpose, to the point that this commercial nature conditions its language.

From this dual nature, Selva-Ruiz (2014: 101) defines music videos as an "audiovisual format used by the record industry as a commercial communications tool, which is based on the addition of images to a pre-existing song". In a very similar sense, Rodríguez-López (2016: 15) understands it as "an audiovisual and promotional product of the recording industry that is directly influenced by the language of cinema, advertising and the artistic avant-garde".

By studying its role in culture and in society we are able to identify music videos as "a privileged cultural asset within dominant cultural industries to reproduce the ideology and hegemonic culture among the youth of the world-system" (Illescas- Martínez (2017: 87). Regarding their content, Guarinos-Galán and Sedeño-Valdellós (2020: 121) identify

“a tendency in the contemporary music video to use current social issues in their narratives, with which they pose contextualized problems in a changing present”. In this way, the music video goes beyond its formal experimental nature and its commercial function to add a testimonial character to the values in force at the time of production, as in fact happens with all cultural manifestations.

Regarding its language, it could be said that the repetition of techniques leads to a modelling of the discourse and consequently to the articulation of a certain music video grammar, which is flexible and subject to constant changes, but remains coherent up to a point.

The repeated use of resources can also lead to self-parody. This stems from the imitation of previous formulas, which requires prior analysis and the replication of its most obvious aspects. We believe it is appropriate to comment on a parody music video distributed by YouTube in direct relation to our object of study. The comic piece entitled ‘If Educational Videos Were Filmed Like Music Videos’, was posted on Tom Scott’s channel (2018) on 15 October 2018 and was directed by Sammy Paul. It features a compilation of a series of frequent practices in music videos, as a result of a textual analysis. Among the practices discussed in the Youtube video, we highlight the following: the opening shot is confusing and unreal as it is slowed down, something that continues throughout the video, it uses rapid cuts with no continuity between them, there is product placement, some shots are speeded up to call attention to certain actions, despite the song lyrics being in synch, diegetic ambient audio is used and the same opening shot is used at the end to convey an impression of a circular narrative. If an entire audiovisual format can be parodied, it is because it can be analysed, categorised, modelled and, ultimately, replicated.

The main aim of this paper is the textual analysis of a music video that could be considered representative of current practices and that responds to frequent and consolidated trends, to the point that it maintains the formal options modelled in the replicas and parodies of the format. The hypothesis of this study is that despite the great artistic potential of the music video format, the most outstanding video of 2020 for MTV prolongs narrative and formal decisions (in direction, editing and post-production) that maintain a classic music video model, to the point of being able to become conventional or exemplary. The formal avant-garde with which the music video emerged is not only modelled so as to become commonplace but is also awarded by the flagship channel of this particular format, MTV. Thus, MTV, which originally offered a disruptive programming model, broadcasts and awards formally conservative pieces, forty years after its launch.

MTV is a television channel (or rather a franchise of channels) belonging to the media group ViacomCBS, which has held the MTV Video Music Awards (MTV VMA) since 1984. In parallel, MTV holds other awards for the different international franchises of the brand and its audience in Europe, Asia, Latin America, Japan, Russia or Australia. MTV broadcasts on the entire group of channels, in addition to its programming model and its contents, the media events related to the brand.

In 2020, MTV continued to hold the awards for a selection of music videos put forward by the network and voted for by its audience. The expansion of the Covid-19 pandemic sent shockwaves throughout the recording industry and the production of music videos, but it has not brought the creative industry to a standstill and companies continue to produce and distribute content. As a consequence of the adaptation of music video production to the conditions of the time, MTV introduced in 2020 two categories of awards appropriate to the circumstances of the recording industry in general: Best Quarantine Performance and Best Music Video From Home. We suggest that an interesting future study could be made of the nominated music awards for both these award categories as a sample of videos created under very particular conditions. Our study focuses on the music video awarded Video of the Year as a representation of all music video production under normal circumstances.

In a context in which VoD platforms such as YouTube have become the primary means of music video distribution, MTV maintains its relationship with the format, even if it has practically disappeared from its programming, through the annual awards (in the United States and in its different international editions). In the absence of an academy that, as in other television or film awards, presents awards, MTV continues to be the leading institution that awards productions and gives them the prestige and public recognition through these awards.

This paper applies a textual analysis methodology on a sample made up of a single music video. The award-winning music video is also a success story both in terms of sales and views: The Weeknd's 'Blinding Lights' was the best music video of 2020 according to MTV viewers. The video received awards at the UK Music Video Awards 2020, MTV Video Music Awards Japan 2020, LOS40 Music Awards 2020 or Variety's Hitmakers 2020, and was nominated for other music video awards.

Our secondary objective is didactic. The textual analysis of a music video representative of a specific moment of production and acclaimed by the audience should be able to offer results and conclusions capable of holding it up as paradigmatic and that teachers and students are able to learn from and apply in audiovisual communication. We view the teaching application of the results of research as a legitimate objective in academic work. Thus, we consider that the textual analysis of a specific music video can achieve the objectives that have been proposed.

As a second secondary objective, we propose a case study of 'Blinding Lights' as a sample of branded content, in such a way that the textual analysis applied to music videos also includes formal criteria related to the representation and impact of brands in audiovisual pieces. The concept of branded content can be viewed as a fusion of advertising and entertainment in a cultural product intended to be distributed as entertainment content while being integrated into a brand's marketing strategy (Horrigan, 2009). These advertising formats propose "non-invasive dialogic formats that favour the participation of the recipient and the generation of experiences that they will remember and relate to positive emotions" (Costa-Sánchez, 2015: 85).

Many authors have studied music videos and MTV as a foundational television channel and a precursor of the format, worth highlighting is the work of Jones (2005), Gow (1996), Selva-Ruiz (2010), Tannenbaum and Marks (2011) or Bonde

Korsgaard (2017). In some cases, these studies suggest music videos and MTV are synonymous, highlighting the particularities of its star format as a vehicle for the identity of the television channel; the changes in MTV programming and the multiplication of channels specialised in specific genres with the MTV brand are already introduced in the most recent studies on MTV. For formal studies such as this one there is less academic literature available. We would like to highlight, however, the valuable contributions of Sedeño (2002), Vernallis (2013), Selva-Ruiz (2014), Rodríguez-López (2014) or Vernallis, Rogers and Perrott (2019). This body of research mainly contributes to providing methodologies of textual analysis and the idea that such methodologies can and should be adapted to the object of analysis and the objectives of research, a fact that invites the development of exploratory research on the format.

Studies that relate music videos with branded content are less common, such as the case of Sánchez-Olmos (2018). However, studies analysing product placement in music videos are much more common, with the aim of identifying brands, types of products or the placement in objective samples based on hit lists on YouTube or Billboard (Pérez-Rufí, Navarrete-Cardero and Gómez-Pérez, 2014; Sánchez Olmos, Segarra Saavedra and Hidalgo Marí, 2019; Sedeño and Schubert, 2020).

2. Methodology

We have taken an intentional sample for the analysis of a video, the one voted Video of the Year by the audience based on a selection of candidates by MTV. Based on the study of the videos awarded between 1984 and 2016, Rodríguez-López and Pérez-Rufí (2017) argue that a probabilistic sample according to reflective and reasoned criteria would justify the choice. MTV here becomes the “institutional” benchmark that sets the standards of popularity and quality of the pieces it selects for its award nominations. It could also be said that a sample of nominees and winners represents, on the one hand, the popular acceptance of some pieces that have received positive feedback from the audience and on the other, it is a commitment by the music and television industry to content that it identifies with, giving them distinction and value (Pérez-Rufí, 2011).

We consider that the Video of the Year 2020 for the MTV audience articulates a conventional formal language of music videos. This award was won by ‘Blinding Lights’ by Abel Tesfaye, Canadian solo artist and musician who performs under the name The Weeknd. Throughout his career Tesfaye, or The Weeknd, has won three Grammy Awards, two American Music Awards, nine Billboard Music Awards, nine Juno Awards, as well as being nominated for an Oscar for the song ‘Earn It’ from the film *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Sam Taylor-Wood, 2015) and having received several nominations in various editions of the MTV awards. ‘Blinding Lights’ received the Video of the Year award and another for Best R&B Video at the MTV VMA 2020, out of seven nominations. The track was written and produced by the musician alongside Max Martin and Oscar Holter, with additional credits for Belly and Jason Quenneville. The video was directed by Anton Tammi and was filmed in Las Vegas and in Los Angeles during four days of filming (Blanco, 2020), finally being published on YouTube on 21 January 2020. The track and the performer himself were part of a Mercedes-Benz campaign launched

29 November 2019, after the signing of the agreement February 2019 (Billboard, 2019), a campaign that later connected with the narrative and the style of the music video.

The application of textual analysis to a single audiovisual work is a frequent practice in film and television studies but also in music video studies. Examples of this type of research are the works by Vernallis (2013) on Beyoncé and Lady Gaga music videos, Tarín Cañadas (2012) on a Radiohead video, or Roig and Cornelio (2015) on productions around a Pharrell Williams track.

In order to meet the objectives of our research we propose an analysis based on the textual analysis of music videos. Through textual analysis of audiovisual discourse applied to music videos, we have tried to identify its formal articulation, the use of narrative and discursive resources and staging, in addition to interpreting its meaning. Textual analysis methodologies could be said to be tools integrated within content analysis, something that according to López Noguero (2002: 174) aims to “discover the basic components of a given phenomenon by extracting them from a given content through a process characterised striving for rigorous measurement.”

Our analysis will be divided into four sections, based on an adaptation of the methodology proposed by Pérez-Rufi and Jódar-Marín (2019) to the research objectives. The first section of the analysis is the preliminary phase, where we note the data that place the piece in its production context: music video and performer, authorship, direction of the music video, authorship of the song, record label of the single (according to the website Discogs.com), production staff involved (as published on YouTube), link on YouTube, date of publication on that platform, musical genre (according to Discogs.com), BPM (beats per minute of the track) and scale (Discogs.com), duration of the music video and duration of the single. In this preliminary phase, we also look at the information published about the branded placement campaign of which the piece is part.

The second phase tackles the content of the music video. We start by providing a brief description of the video itself and, later, categorise it according to the typology proposed by Sedeño-Valdellós (2002). This typology includes the descriptive music video, as a representation of the performance of the track by a band or performer or as aesthetic experimentation around various visual codes (conceptual); the narrative music video, which develops a story with the elements that make up the narrative; and the blended music video, which combines elements of descriptive (performance or conceptual) with narrative videos. In direct relation to this classification, we evaluate the narrative of the piece based on the activation or not of its components: events, characters and transformation of the situation (Casetti and Di Chio, 1991). We subsequently list the topics addressed in the piece. In this case, it is necessary to interpret and categorise content in one sense or another. We also evaluate the impact that the content developed in the video has on the representation of the brand and the values it transmits as part of the branded content strategy.

The third phase proposes the formal audiovisual analysis of the music video, with categories that address issues related to the direction, editing and post-production. Regarding the direction, we have observed the following categories: most frequent framing according to the European scale of shots (WS, wide shot; FS, full shot; AS, American shot; MS, medium

shot; CU, close-up; ECU, extreme close-up); presence and function of camera movements (zoom, travelling, digital travelling), camera angle (normal, high, low angle) and diegetic ambient sound. When analysing the video's editing we have paid attention to aspects related to the subjective perception of rhythm (from take duration, camera movements, the internal movement within the frame and the tension of the shot's content); shot speed (normal, slowed, speeded up); type of transition between takes (cut, continuity, fade in/out, washout, wipe). Post-production also sees the use of computer graphics and digital visual effects (VFX) and we outline the use of graphics and textual resources (diegetic, in the case that they form part of the staging, or extradiegetic, if they are not part of the registered space and are edited in). Regarding the analysis of the branded content strategy from the formal perspective, we also pay attention to the type of shots, camera movements and the way in which the brand and product appear in the discourse and editing in the video.

The fourth phase of this methodology proposes the analysis of the staging. The analysis of staging audiovisual productions describes the form and components of the frame. This analysis includes elements of audiovisual language in part coinciding with the precedents of theatre: composition of the shot (which we simplify by observing the application of the rule of thirds or symmetrical composition), stage design (artificial or natural, with realistic or dramatic intentions), lighting (with functional intention or not, realistic or dramatic), wardrobe and make up (evaluated as realistic or not, appropriate to the performance of the characters or not) and performance (that is, if the acting is appropriate to the action developed in the story or not, with possible realistic intentions or not). Also, in this section we briefly talk about the integration of the Mercedes brand as part of the staging.

We have not tackled a broader sample of pieces to compare against the music video being analysed as we consider that it would go beyond the objectives of this study. Discussing the most commonly repeated formal practices of music video production, Selva (2014: 482) states that “in most cases, each music video is adapted to the conventions of the genre of which it is part”. Although these practices should be followed, “constant experimentation and reinvention that are justified for reasons of strict efficiency” must also be sought (Selva, 2014: 506). Selva also rejects the idea that the most original music videos flee from the format's conventions, “since it is likely that, precisely, these video clips will achieve their mission more effectively thanks to this dose of creativity” (Selva, 2014 : 506).

3. Results

3.1. Pre-analysis phase

Table 1. Pre-analysis phase

Music video	<i>Blinding Lights</i>		
Performer	The Weeknd		
Directed by	Anton Tammi		
Song writing	Abel Tesfaye, Ahmad Balshe, Jason Quenneville, Max Martin, Oscar Holter		
Record label	Republic Records, Universal		
Authorship	Actress: Miki Hamano; Production Company: Somesuch; Executive Producer: Saskia Whinney; Producer: Sarah Park; Director of Photography: Oliver Millar; 2nd Unit DP: Devin "Daddy" Karringten; Steadicam Op: Niels Lindelien; Gaffer: Nizar Najm; Key Grip: Marlow Nunez; Production Designer: Adam William Wilson; 1st AD: Kenneth Taylor; Editor: Janne Vartia & Tim Montana; Post Production Supervisor: Alec Ernest; VFX: Mathematic; Colorist: Nicke Jacobsson; Sound Designer: Akseli Soini; 3D: Oscar Böckerman; Title Design: Aleks Tammi.		
Link	https://youtu.be/4NRXx6U8ABQ	Release date	21/01/2020
Genre	Pop (Synthwave, New Wave)	BPM / key	171 / D Major
Duration of video	4:22	Duration of single	3:21

Source: YouTube, Discogs, Billboard. Author's work

The Weeknd's track 'Blinding Lights' was released on 29 November 2019 by Republic Records (Universal Music affiliate), as the second single from the album *After Hours*, released on 20 March 2020. Produced by Max Martin, a famous Swedish producer with 23 number one hits on the US Billboard chart, the single was released on the same day as the Mercedes-Benz campaign to promote its EQC 400 4MATIC electric car model was launched. The theme was the soundtrack of the different advertising spots, particularly that of the 'Enjoy electric' ad. With the 'all-new EQC x The Weeknd 'Blinding Lights'', in which the artist himself drives the vehicle followed by scenes representing different moments in history and locations in which the brand's cars play a central role. The video's evolution of the car throughout its history concludes with the performer driving the latest model while singing the song.

The music video, released on 20 January 2020, was made popular by the advertising campaign, which, beyond its artistic value and its appeal to the audience, explains its success in charts and YouTube views. The music video also shows the artist driving a Mercedes, specifically the Mercedes-AMG GT convertible (Blanco, 2020), thus creating continuity with the previous advertising campaign. The introduction of the brand in the video's discourse is very subtle and so the

advertising message is well integrated in the video and does not given the impression of an overt product placement strategy. The use of luxury brands, including automobile brands, is a frequent practice in music videos, as demonstrated by Sedeño-Valdellós and Schubert (2020).

Instead of product placement, in this case we should talk about branded content. Del Pino-Romero and Castelló-Martínez (2015: 111) suggest that, unlike product placement, the product is not only integrated into the content “but brands create their own content to share with users”. We do not have any evidence to suggest that the musical theme was composed for the advertising campaign, but its audiovisual pieces (ads and music video) were placed at the service of the brand.

The strategy was successful for both the artist and his record company as well as the car brand, with the success of the campaign (at least in YouTube views) and the song being mutually reinforced. Music videos already have a commercial purpose, as a tool for promoting tracks and artists, but in cases such as this one, when it is conceived as part of a branded strategy, the boundaries between advertisement and music video are blurred.

The aspects of the music video that go beyond its discourse worth noting are that it was directed by Anton Tammi, a producer with other music videos to his name, according to the Imvdb.com database (2020), for the production company Somesuch & Co. The video was shot on the streets of Las Vegas (on Fremont Street, specifically) and in Los Angeles and continues the plot narrative of the video for the previous single, ‘Heartless’, with the same production team, which then continues in the video for the third single, ‘In Your Eyes’.

3.2. Content analysis

Table 2. Sample content analysis

Description	Type	Narrative	Subjects
The artist wanders the deserted streets of a big city at night, some of them in Las Vegas, as he dances and runs flat out, looking happy. He drives fast, goes to a live music venue where a performer makes him fly towards her, gets beaten up and keeps dancing.	Narrative	Yes, weak	Drunkenness. Violence. Luxury. Risky situations.

Source: author's work

The music video shows The Weeknd wandering through a deserted, urban night scene, which we recognise in scenes such as Las Vegas, where he laughs, dances and runs while driving a car at full speed through deserted streets. As a continuation of the previous video, ‘Heartless’, we know that the performer has drunk a large amount of alcohol and is drugged after licking a hallucinogenic toad, which may explain his delusional and reckless behaviour despite being attacked by the bouncers of a venue where a singer with Asian features performs and -literally- makes him fly towards

the stage. Tension is created by the dangerous behaviour of the main character such as reckless driving through a deserted city and dancing on the highway or in a tunnel.

Beyond the continuity with the previous video, some shots refer to the film *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Terry Gilliam, 1998), where the character played by Johnny Depp suffered hallucinations after consuming drugs. Other more or less obvious references are films shot in Las Vegas such as *Casino* (Martin Scorsese, 1995), *Ocean's Eleven* (Steven Soderbergh, 2001) or *The Hangover* (Todd Phillips, 2009), as well as video clips such as 'I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For' by U2 (Barry Devlin, 1987) or 'Viva Las Vegas' by ZZ Top (Warner Bros Records, 1992).

The lyrics of the song are about love with the performer telling another person how he misses her. They allude to two themes represented in the music video: driving fast ('So I hit the road in overdrive, baby') and deserted urban spaces ('I look around and Sin City's cold and empty; Oh, the city's cold and empty'). The fact that the lyrics include the line 'You can turn me on with just a touch, baby' that is a literal interpretation of the Mercedes' campaign commercial, tells us that the writing of the song itself was already part of the brand's branded content.

The music video could be categorised as narrative since it follows a story of the actions and transformations of a character. However, the narrative is weak, it is possible to follow the series of disordered events that occur to the main character, although the causality that interweaves the scenes seems more like a string of actions than a strong plot narrative. The video thus collects different moments in the nocturnal journey of a character who wanders without a defined objective, without a clear narrative line. Considering both the preceding video ('Heartless') and the one that would follow it ('In Your Eyes'), it is possible to make an overall interpretation of the chain of events experienced by the character lives and of the film genres it refers to, but 'Blinding Lights' on its own is not enough to be able to interpret this narrative. The repetition of very similar scenes and disordered sequence of events give a sense of circularity to the video.

The video addresses topics such as addiction, drunkenness or drug abuse, excess, risky situations, luxury, violence and sexual attraction. Great tension is created between the lead character's carefree and joyful abandon and the risks to his wellbeing and violent scenes. This tension is enhanced by the contrast between very wide-angle shots that underline the character's loneliness and his recklessness on the road.

The performer's character seems to offer a self-critical parody of himself as opposed to portraying a morally edifying image. The Weeknd risks his life in Las Vegas, on drugs and portraying an excessive and negative, although charismatic, character, like the eponymous villain in the film *Joker* by Todd Phillips (2019) or a much earlier Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971).

This dubious moral image is presented as fiction, even if the artist appears to be playing himself. This ambiguous portrayal of the character is, however, consistent with the dark nature and disturbing plots of Abel Tesfaye's previous music videos.

The integration of the Mercedes brand and the vehicle in the narrative and discourse is done in a natural and unforced way. The product plays an active role in the story, the shots featuring brand require careful viewing and there is coherence between the story and the components of the staging, including the vehicle. This video does not employ a typical product placement strategy where the characters showcase the product in a break from the narrative or plotline.

Added to the character's reckless driving is his dubious morality, we suspect the car is stolen given that he dons gloves before getting in, although this is suggested and not confirmed. However, the vehicle and the brand are not seen in a negative light, on the contrary, the character gazes fascinated at the vehicle, including its details, and although he drives in a drunken state, he is also euphoric in the most absolute expression and anarchic freedom that comes with driving fast without a specific destination. The satisfaction of driving erratically through deserted urban spaces at night is common in television ads for cars. It showcases the car's speed and efficiency as an urban, glamorous and elegant car worthy of the character's high social status and purchasing power, despite his antagonistic role. The danger posed by the reckless driving of the performer can even reinforce the idea of vehicle safety, despite everything, The Weeknd does not suffer a traffic accident, perhaps because it is a Mercedes. We have, therefore, an example of branded content that successfully and subtly combines the virtues of the product, without exaggeration, featuring a dark character who evinces reprehensible behaviour.

3.3. Formal analysis (production, editing, post-production)

Table 3. Formal analysis

Direction	
Types of shots	Very varied shots, including mainly close ups and full shots
Camera angles	Various
Camera movements	Travelling, zoom, handheld camera, digital zoom
Diegetic sound	Yes
Editing	
Rhythm	Fast
Camera speed	Normal. Some takes are slowed down and other speeded up
Transitions between takes	Cuts, washouts
Postproduction	
VFX	Yes
Graphics / text	Extradiegetic text

Source: author's work

When we look at the formal aspects of the direction of the music video, it is possible to see a varied use of resources in all senses and classical functions. Thus, when it comes to the planning of shots and takes, we consider that these are very varied and respond to conventional intentions in audiovisual grammar: the full shots place the character or the action in context, enabling the layout of the scenes, which are essential in understanding the character's loneliness and contrasting his recklessness with the civilised locations. The medium shots capture the character's interaction with his surroundings and the close-ups focus on the character's emotion and reactions. Extreme close-ups of the character or parts of the car compose a mosaic of elaborate and even affected close-ups, despite the urban and nocturnal, or even unbeautiful, scene setting.

Compared to the usual positioning of the camera at normal angles, the video constantly alternates between low and high angles, which combined with the great variety of frames and choppy editing ends up reinforcing the impression of fragmentation. The camera movements are constant and different, alternating tracking shots with a crane or mobile supports with other hand-held shots, giving a greater sense of the character's instability and the impression of rhythm. The shots in which the performer holds the camera highlights his movements and his subjective, and intoxicated and altered, perspective.

The noise of the car and the urban space is edited with ambient sound (diegetic sound), which adds realism and speed to the character's reckless driving. The prominence of the Mercedes is constant, even in the ambient sound, even if, as we pointed out, the brand is hardly shown.

In short, formal resources are very diverse but are given cohesion in the editing, and in the repetition of characters, motifs and settings, as well as in the lighting and other aspects of the staging.

We can therefore conclude from our analysis of the video's editing that, firstly the short cuts from shot to shot give it a fast-paced feel. In short, it applies a very conventional conception of the music video in terms of editing, even without being a meta-music video, it is a piece that maintains the usual techniques and resources in the format. Selva affirms (2014: 489) that it is common for "a music video to seek a feeling of movement at all levels, which can be achieved with movement within the frame, but it is more frequent that it is achieved with agile and fast montage".

The takes are shot at normal speed, except for a couple of slowed down shots to simulate hallucinations by the character (this sensation is reinforced with a slowed down soundtrack as well), while in the shots with the car racing through the streets we can sense that the takes have been sped up. Using slow shutter speeds to shoot outdoors at night explains why vehicle and building lights are blurred and enhance the feeling of speed.

Scenes cut from one to another, providing a greater feeling of speed. On some occasions the transitions between shots come from the shot themselves, such as camera washouts that do not allow us to identify motifs except moving lights, but that are interspersed between the shots.

Attention to post-production reveals the colour grading (adjusting colorimetry) is carefully done, providing continuity between scenes, as well as an obvious use of VFX in the scenes in which the performer seems to fly to the stage at a venue. This can also be seen in the dynamic lighting effects used to show the performer's hallucinations, or when the name of the song comes up on screen.

Following more current trends, extradiegetic text appears at the beginning (artist and song title) and at the end, with credits to the director, the performer (this time with his real name), the actress who plays the singer with Asian features and the producer. As well as fulfilling their original purpose, the credits in the music video give the impression of being a short film, a short audiovisual piece with a full narrative, with a beginning and an end.

Although it is not a meta-music video as such, The Weeknd's proposal is so conventional in its formal aspects that it could be held up as a quintessential music video. It can be argued that this reference to formal techniques characteristic of the 1980s music videos of New Wave bands aims to combine a retro-style song with a music video that also pretends to be retro by design. The single, as we have pointed out, topped number one in the US Billboard and has millions of views on YouTube, which leads us to think that the viewer of music videos does not object to the repetition of formulas or the absence of originality in the format.

Let us note with regard to the integration of the brand and the vehicle from a formal perspective, first of all, that, in terms of types of shots, close-ups (brand, headlights, speed indicators, details of the character's face while driving, details of the hands on the steering wheel) are alternated with other full shots and medium shots that show the moving vehicle, from a wide variety of angles. Therefore, the outside and inside details of the car are showcased, as well as the very brief inclusions of the Mercedes brand. Virtually all interior or exterior shots of the car have some type of movement (travelling, handheld camera, zoom and even a digital zoom), which increases the impression of the vehicle's speed.

It is interesting to look closely at the editing of the different shots of the video: the exterior shots of the car or shot from the inside take up one minute, 19 seconds and six frames (1,980 frames in total, in PAL system). This is exactly 30% of the full length of the music video. This precision of the duration of the shots of the vehicle suggests that the presence of the product and the brand in the video has been agreed beforehand down to the smallest detail. In total, 73 shots are of the car or its interior. Considering the duration of the total of these 73 shots of the vehicle, the average of each shot would be one second and two frames. The few shots (only four) in which the vehicle's insignia is shown relatively clearly are of such a short duration (just nine frames) that they hide the commercial nature of the video quite well. It is important to note how fast the scenes cut from one to the other, contributing to the feeling of speed of the music video, but also of the vehicle.

This prominence of the product is enhanced by the insertion of ambient sound from the car. In addition, the title of the music video ('Blinding Lights') appears on a full frontal shot of the vehicle, where the Mercedes logo can be seen. In this shot, the lights of the headlights intensify until they create an effect similar to that of a lightning bolt through

visual effects (VFX). The digitally created lightning bolt, something we can associate with the idea of speed, thus adds to the impression of rhythm and speed that the music video as a whole transmits, in general, and the car, in particular.

3.4. Analysis of the staging

Table 4. Analysis of the staging

Composition.	Symmetric
Set design	Natural
Lighting	Realistic / dramatic
Characterization	Realistic
Performance	Excessive, exaggerated

Source: author's work

Analysis of the staging shows that it follows common trends for music videos. First of all, the symmetrical composition of the shots stands out, the main subjects tend to be located in the centre of the frame, avoiding riskier compositions. The conventionality of the planning, the direction of the camera angles and the adaptation to functional and coherent discourses with the television and cinematographic audiovisual grammar are reinforced with the composition of the shots in which the main subject focuses.

Secondly, attention to scenography shows a preference for the representation of realistic spaces, whether natural or recreated on set. The famous Fremont Street in Las Vegas and its unusual lighting through screens and luminous LED signs represents a real space, a natural location, despite being so artificial in nature. Night-time urban exteriors are also included to create an impression of realism, without too much intervention being noticed.

Consistent with these formal options, the lighting is intended to be realistic, although its prominence is such that we consider that it is used in a dramatic way, with shots that only include luminous motifs, along with others filmed with low shutter speeds to turn lights into moving bursts of colour. It thus responds to the title of the song, 'Blinding Lights', with an active role in the staging that refers to the lyrics of the song.

Despite the realistic intent of the components of the staging, the performance of the actor does not try to be realistic and is excessive, exaggerated, with very exaggerated gestures. This exaggerated performance finds its meaning in the lyrics of the track, increasing the expression of the performer's emotions. From the point of view of the narrative, it could be justified by the character's state of intoxication and hallucinations.

It is possible to conclude that, in general terms, the 'Blinding Lights' music video does not stand out for applying excessively disruptive practices in staging, in addition to running few risks in the formal articulation of the video in general. Despite the spectacular nature of some shots, the action shots of the vehicle and the introduction of some shots with VFX, the staging based on natural settings, the limited number of characters and the filming itself, as noted, in just four nights, lead us to believe this video was shot on a budget with effective results.

The staging aspects of brand and product integration highlight the issues we have already discussed. The shots with the vehicle as the main motif or as the space in which the character acts tend to be symmetrical, a fundamentally realistic natural setting and the lighting participates in both the realistic and the most expressive and dramatic moments. Worth noting in terms of the lighting, from the first moment the Mercedes model that The Weeknd drives appears in the shot, the red lights of its headlights stand out clearly and intensely, underlining the meaning of the lyrics of the song. Later on, exterior shots are illuminated by highly directional red lights: we have understood through the previous shots that these shots correspond to the spaces through which the vehicle moves, regardless of whether it is in the shot or not.

4. Discussion

We started with hypothesis that the 2020 MTV Music Video of the Year made use of conventional formal language for the music video format, a statement that we believe is demonstrated through applied textual analysis. The avant-garde music video, open to maximum experimentation and subject to the application of creative and explorative techniques, is still valid and offers many and varied examples every year. However, the award-winning entries in competitions for commercial videos, such as the MTV VMAs, tend to be videos that run no risks and conform to well-known and frequently used techniques and formulas, to the point of being the subject of parodies.

We did not start by comparing other examples of music video that may help us identify formal practices in the format, although we find similar elements in terms of formal aspects with the practices in Tom Scott's parody YouTube video (2018). Starting with slow motion with a character in a decontextualized space, circularity of the narrative discourse, fast cutting between shots without continuity, speeded up shots, introduction of trademarks, presence of ambient sound to make the representation of actions realistic, etc. Despite the many exceptions that could be found throughout the universe of MTV award-winning music videos, we can conclude that The Weeknd's 'Blinding Lights' makes use of its formal resources by following formal guidelines and discursive and narrative conventions.

We could argue that the video being studied is intentionally conventional, inasmuch as it pays homage to the techno-pop music of the 80s, and more specifically 'Take on me' by A-ha, and at the same time aims to convey nostalgia, a retro music video where all its resources refer to practices that could be said to be typical of the music video. As mentioned above, although it is not a meta-music video, its conventional adherence to the formal language of the music video makes it representative of the entire format.

The video of the year for MTV is thus a model format programmed by the channel in the 80s, with which, in some way, it resorts to nostalgia to reward itself, or the identity with which it was promoted in its origins. This same desire for self-homage can be seen in two other videos nominated for the 2020 MTV VMA Video of the Year category: Taylor Swift's 'The Man', directed by the artist herself, and 'Life is Good' by Future featuring Drake, directed by Director X, which are metavideos where the filming of the music video is presented in the piece itself.

We also believe that 'Blinding Lights' is representative of music video production in the contemporary context due to its obvious commercial purpose, not just for promoting the track, but for the automobile brand that produces it. The association of Mercedes-Benz with a prestigious performer and music producer (The Weeknd and Max Martin) for producing branded content is shown to be an effective strategy in which commercial and cultural agents have mutually boosted their impact and public recognition and the MTV Video of the Year award is proof of this.

We believe that it is very significant that the music video considered video of the year by the MTV audience and by the television network is part of a brand's branded content campaign. The record industry entered into a deep crisis at the beginning of the century, due to the shift in audiences' leisure habits, new ways of consuming music content and online piracy, a crisis it began to recover from in 2014 after hitting bottom in 2013. The record companies, responsible for the production of the format, had difficulties in financing the music videos and became more creative in forging commercial agreements with brands to maintain the production of high-budget videos. The use of branded content and product placement strategies are, therefore, consequences of the crisis from which the record industry is still trying to recover today.

The paradox is that The Weeknd's open relationship with the brand and its business goals does not dent the acceptance of the music video; the audience has not rejected this link between the cultural product and the commercial brand. Likewise, as we have pointed out, the repetition of established techniques and the use of a clichéd and conventional language in the creation of the music video also seemed popular with audiences.

The hybridization of the music video with other formats goes one step further with the music video designed as a commercial production within a branded content strategy. The key for viewers not to see it as just a long TV commercial and to reject its openly commercial nature is, as 'Blinding Lights' does, in offering quality, attractive content that adds value on its own. In this case, add a catchy song produced by the famous producer Max Martin and performed by one of the biggest stars of the moment, with a story that generates intrigue and tension and a formal articulation with fast paced direction and editing, a formula capable of seducing audiences. Let us also note that the brand and the product are naturally integrated into the plot and despite their enormous prominence (present for 30% of the duration of the music video), the piece has not been subordinated for commercial purposes.

We conclude, therefore, that 'Blinding Lights' is a representative music video in the development of the language of music videos, in addition to being produced on a tight budget, something managed by working in association with companies from different sectors outside of the industry through branded content strategies. In terms of its distribution, it is worth

noting that YouTube and social media facilitate the distribution of branded content, since they do not impose limits like conventional commercial TV channels do on commercial content beyond their control. The paradox is, once again, that it is a linear television channel, MTV and its audience, that rewards a video conceived as branded content.

Taking into account the conclusions reached by this study, we propose future research should broaden the analysis of the videos awarded by MTV taking into account the formal criteria that we have used here and that include a textual analysis of music videos, as well as other videos produced as part of branded content strategies. One could also ask, and it is a question that we propose for future research, if the MTV awards reward the best music videos or the most popular tracks of the year, regardless of their associated music video, a fact that would question the very nature of the awards.

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