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"Shis gat tö luk"
Traces of new ethnicity in Finnish music videos¹

Finnish music videos had their breakthrough during the middle years of 1990s. Prior to that they were more or less momentary curiosities – there was no significant forum for them, and largely therefore their production was considered unprofitable. In 1992, however, the "best" Finnish music videos were "officially" awarded for the first time by the sound and film producers' association in Finland, with Muuvi prizes; a year later the band 22-Pistepirkko won 5th place in MTV Europe's "counter-Eurovision-song-contest" with the video *Birdy*; in 1994 and 1995, Finnish music videos went into national television distribution through two programmes, *Listo* and *Jyrki*, respectively. These can be seen as the major factors in the development that has made Finnish music videos a self-evident and even taken-for-granted part of Finnish popular music production.

Music videos have also become an integral part of the progress toward what is perhaps the Finnish popular music industry's most desired goal – an international star. This has been a national dream since the early 1960s, but despite of a couple of close shaves Finnish popular music artists have not won any large successes beyond their national borders. Following the 1960s tradition of using promo-clips to promote bands abroad, music videos are thought to be the most efficient way to win attention for bands outside of Finland. There has, however, been some debate about whether Finnish videos are good enough to promote Finnish artists in international markets successfully. One must, of course, remember that the "quality" of clips is measured against the standards set primarily by MTV, whose heavy rotation is comprised of videos made for already established artists who are supported by major record companies' multi-million dollar investments.

The supposedly poor quality of Finnish music videos has most often been attributed to the meager financial resources available for video production. This has led, in turn, to the contention that there is something wrong with the aesthetics of the clips - as if the aesthetics were equal to the technological demands of the videos. But, as the success of *Birdy* has shown, Finnish music videos have the potential to measure up to the standards of MTV's mainstream music videos. In any case, on MTV Europe Finnish music videos are most frequently seen on the programme *Alternative Nation* – a slot into which most of the videos outside the mainstream of

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major Anglo-American stars and big money production fall. To get out of this slot would require international stardom, and thus getting out of this slot would mean achieving such status. But this seems to be a vicious circle: on one hand, to get sold requires becoming visible, and on the other, to become visible requires getting sold. So, for "alternative" acts the problem turns on finding the balance between meeting the demands of the mainstream and remaining alternative.

In this article I aim to highlight this problematic situation through the example of one video, in which, in my opinion, the relationship between mainstream and alternative, or sameness and difference if you like, is clearly visible and audible. In particular, I am interested in the various manifestations of ethnicity in this video, and this brings me closer to considerations about the representations of Finnishness and (its) Otherness in the video. The video I am talking about is *The Look* by an artist named Waldo.

The video

The song *The Look* – and a video of it – was originally released in 1989 by Roxette, a highly popular Swedish band at the time. Waldo's version of it came out in 1997; the same year the video won the award for the Best Finnish Dance Music Video at the *Jyrki Music Video Awards* gala. While accepting the award the artist himself emphasized the importance of music videos as part of the marketing and promoting strategies of the Finnish popular music industry, and he was labelled by the host of the gala as "an artist who is really utilizing music videos in his career" (JMVA 1997; freely translated). It is worth noting, however, that these awards were based on a public telephone vote in which callers could choose between three (or four) "nominees". So, in this respect, the fact that *The Look* won the contest does not tell us as much about its standards as it tells about its popularity; to have been chosen as one of the nominees may be a better indicator of its "quality".

Visually *The Look* is situated in a hair dresser/barber shop setting. All the action takes place in only one room. The room has a checkered floor, a couple of pillars in front of one wall, a barber's table with mirrors on top of it and two chairs in front of it, a leather sofa, a hair dryer, a wall clock, and a gramophone on a small portable metallic table. All the furniture is stylistically dated, most of it probably from the early 60s.

There are 10 people visible in the video. First, and foremost, there is Waldo, the lead singer; two young women perform as background singers. There are also two "blonde beauties", a black "model", an elderly "hag", a "geezer" sweeping the floor, a bold man, and a "caveman". All the women are dressed more or less in fashions that belong to the period of the interior design; all except the hag have short pink dresses revealing their legs and lower thighs. The men, in their turn, have more variable costumes: Waldo has a some kind of hip hop outfit; the geezer has a shirt and a vest; the bold man is dressed in a suit made either of leather or rubber; and the caveman is, at first, wearing an animal fur and is equipped with a wooden club, but later he wears a colourful shirt and a black vest.

As is the case for many other music videos, it is difficult to say whether the visuals of *The Look* have a clear plot or narrative. Rather, all the actions depicted in the video can be seen as visualizations of situations, which do, however, have a certain amount of narrativity in them, and this is even more amplified by the relatively slow rhythm of the video's editing – during its 3 minutes and 38 seconds it has "only" little more than 50 cuts, and some of them last around 10 seconds. Anyway, there are three major "situations" represented: first, the blondes are sitting on the chairs while their hair is being trimmed by the singers; the hag and the model sit on the sofa, and Waldo is bouncing around, singing. Second, the bald man comes and gets his head polished by Waldo himself; at this time, the blondes have left the chairs and joined the miscellaneous background action with the singers, the hag, the model, and the geezer. And, finally, there is the caveman who has his hair and beard fixed, again by Waldo.

These three situation pictures also reflect the structure of the video's music (see figure 1). Basically, the music is in the form of AAA, i.e., there is one progression being repeated three times. On closer examination, however, it becomes clear that these progressions are structured individually, and the only block repeated is that formed by two verses, a chorus, and a bridge. The song itself begins with an intro, which consists of a recurrent riff, and which is followed by the bridge and a break. Between the bridge after the first chorus and the third verse the break recurs, only this time with Waldo toasting "watch me now". The song ends by repeating the bridge with slight alterations, and there is also a kind of a coda, in which the punch line "she's got the look" is sung by Waldo alone, with no accompanying instruments. Tonally, the song goes in the key of A major, and it is almost entirely based on a chord progression I–bVII–IV–I, the chord changing on the first beat of every measure. All in all, I believe it can be reasonably argued that *The Look* does not offer any structural or harmonic solutions unusual to popular music. The almost infinite repetition of certain building blocks, and the flattened seventh have been there from the very beginning.

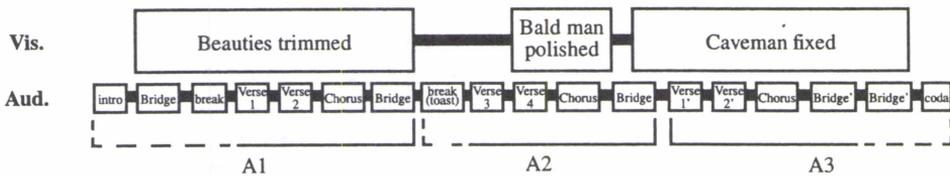


Figure 1. The structural equivalency between music and visuals in *The Look*.

Jyrki Music Video Awards categorized the song as dance music; if we take it as such, it is easier to explain why the most prominent rhythmic feature is a presumably synthesized bass drum hit on almost every beat. These hits are very intense, and they have a certain burying effect on all the other rhythmic (and sometimes even melodic) elements. For example, it took me couple of times of listening to the song before I realized that it in fact has a reggae-style backbeat. And, in addition, there

are steel drums or equivalent sounds (again, most probably synthesized) being used, especially in the breaks.

So, we could talk about a certain kind of conflict of genres here. On one hand, there is the heavy "Euro-dance" beat, and, on the other, there are some features that could be associated with Caribbean music, reggae in particular. This conflict can be seen as further amplified by the various vocal styles present in the song: Waldo, who is reciting (rapping?) monotonously, rather than singing, pronounces and accentuates his words in a somewhat "reggaeish" style; the background singers, in turn, have fairly closed and uptight voices – the "voice of a little girl" one could argue. In the chorus and the later bridges, however, there is a female voice rasping the words "she's got the look", thus giving us an indication of a "tougher" vocal style closer to the genres of blues and rock. Together with this particular style of singing, the horn section fills here and there push the song in the same direction, possibly bringing us somewhere into the realm of rhythm'n'blues and soul. But then again, what is new with this kind of quoting from and between different genres?

Finally, let me make a couple of short notions on the lyrics (see appendix 1) of *The Look*. When compared to the original (Roxette 1998) it becomes obvious that there are not too many differences between the two. In fact, only in the last line of the chorus the words "she's got the" in front of "look" have been left out in Waldo's version. One could, of course, raise the issue concerning Waldo's pronunciation and its effects on the lyrical expression *per se*, but I feel that, in general, these effects are minimal. Nevertheless, I must admit that due to his pronunciation some of Waldo's words may be obscure, causing the lyrical content to blur, too – in fact, I'm afraid I would still be transcribing the words had there not been the aid of the Internet. In any event, in my opinion it is not the content of the lyrics that counts here, but rather the style – especially of the oral expression.

Still, I wish to take a brief look at the content of the lyrics. The first thing that comes to my mind in considering them is the relatively high amount of "psychedelic" metaphors: "kissing is a colour", "fire in the ice", "loving is the ocean", "kissing is the wet sand", to cite a few. Although these phrases may seem odd and strange, they are still not unusual in the discourse of popular music. Especially different genres of the broader category of rock music use this kind of language quite frequently, and I believe it is often used as a sign of artistry, originality, and authenticity.

Also the omnipresent element of deixis makes the lyrics of *The Look* typical for popular music. We cannot say too much about the time, the place, or the actors depicted – in fact, it becomes doubtful if these are depicted at all. For example, we have no clear idea about the identity of "she", "you", or "I", though perhaps the most "preferable" way to read the lyrics is to see "she" and "you" as the same person, and "I" as changing his (her?) position in the middle of the chorus. I would like to shake this arrangement a little, though, because there are certain phrases and expressions that, in my opinion, disrupt the traditional, "preferred" reading of the song's lyrics – which would to quite an extent be heterosexual and patriarchal in nature – of the song's lyrics. The most obvious of these phrases is the one in the 4th verse: "she's a miracle man". Now, I am not interested in speculating about all the

possible meanings of this expression; however, I would like to point out that it and the likes of it enable various strategies through which it is possible to construct more "unexpected" identities for the protagonists of the song. In fact, this would be possible in the first place even without these disruptive phrases, on the basis of deixis itself. But, for *The Look* in particular, the lyrics provide more possibilities to construct multi-gendered subjects than multi-ethnic ones. I, at least, have serious difficulties in finding any predominantly "ethnic" features in the lyrics of the song – only the phrase "a brown-eyed girl turn blue" evokes some Scandinavian images for me, but to justify this view even a bit more adequately seems troubling enough not to dwell upon it any longer.

New ethnicity

I have previously (Kärjä 1997) suggested that Finnish music videos depict "ethnic" (from the point of view of Finland) people quite frequently. This "ethnicity" of the videos is not, however, impartial, but rather favours "Western" conceptions of ethnic minorities. In the case of Finnish music videos this means that such national minorities as Sámi, Romanies, and Somalis are disregarded – one can always wonder whether this results from the somewhat antagonistic nature of these minorities in respect to Finnish establishment, or from something completely different. Nevertheless, I find it especially surprising that Sámi imagery, or images of Lapland in general, are fairly scarce in Finnish music videos nowadays. During the 1970s we had at least two videos, or film clips, made for the Eurovision Song Contest, that had images of snow-covered lakes and fields in them – in the late 90s the snow is on subway tracks and desolate urban streets. Though, as an aside, it seems that on the threshold of the new millennium the snow-covered lakes are coming back – or at least they are once again being appreciated on the "official" level: the 1999 Golden Muuvi award was given to the makers of *Apocalyptica's* video *Nothing Else Matters*, in which the band is reportedly playing in real winter conditions on the open and isolated Yyteri beach, a rather famous one near the city of Pori.

So, I have, in fact, proposed that there is an element of "secured Otherness" in Finnish music videos. By this I mean that particularly the imagery of the videos does not differ significantly from that familiar to us in the mainstream Anglo-American videos. Sometimes this tendency results in visualizations in which Anglo-American imagery not actually present in Finnish culture becomes embedded in it: there is a video in which three juvenile Finnish rock musicians warm themselves around a burning trash can. In the case of Waldo's video, however, these kind of overtly Anglo-American images are missing. But still, in one respect, it fits the pattern of "secured Otherness" I have talked about: the black model can be categorized as a representative of an ethnic minority. And based on the previous notions about her outfit, as well as her posturing (i.e., her identity as a model), I feel confident enough to say that her blackness can be interpreted as quite "Western" in nature.

The same can be said about the music and the lyrics of music videos in general. I believe that we could spend an eternity talking about the (im)possible markers of national or cultural identity that could be found in the music of the clips. But, as I am sure we all are aware of, "Western" popular culture does have a tendency to recycle its products, to copy them, and to recontextualize them in such a manner that in the end it is virtually impossible – or, at least, in many cases, quite unreasonable – to attach any distinctly national labels to them. Like Tony Mitchell (1996: 8) says, "[t]he history of popular music is a constant flow of appropriations in which origins, and notions of originality, are often difficult, if not impossible, to trace." Still, we Finns, for example, have a popular music category called "Finno-rock", which for a great number of people is clearly an example of Finnishness made audible – and this is not just a question of lyrics and/or language. We cannot forget that the Finnish hit song tradition has the same kind of role in this respect either. Now, what makes Waldo and his version of *The Look* especially interesting is that the song is originally Swedish – it comes from a country Finland has observed enviously in its efforts to create a formula with which an international breakthrough for at least one artist would be achieved. I may be mean here, but I cannot escape the thought that this song has been chosen for Waldo precisely because of this; now the promotional machinery working on Waldo's behalf can focus entirely on him and stop worrying about the music, since it has been proven successful earlier. And, as it comes from the neighbour country it does not necessarily feel so strange – although, as noted above, one might wonder what kind of popular music would.

Stuart Hall (1991: 44–45) has argued that "[t]he great collective identities of class, race, nation, gender, and the West have been disrupted. They have not disappeared, but to think of them in the same homogenous form as in the recent past is no longer possible." This has resulted in new kinds of identity formation, where people may mix identity categories that were previously thought of as oppositional. Especially for young urban people with three or more urban generations behind them, traditional identity categories have lost their significance. In fact, this kind of generation gap cannot be disregarded, and we must see the conflict in which youth culture is opposed by parent culture and national media discourse (Back 1996: 71). Les Back (1996: 8) summarizes the situation thus:

Crude models of "the traditional" or primordial ethnic definitions are of little use when applied to the ambiguous social ground inhabited by multi-ethnic communities of young people in metropolitan settings. The social semantics of race, nationhood and belonging have undergone important transformations at the local level.

To some extent, this situation is also present in Finland; for example, the cultural forms of hip hop culture, including rap music, have made their way to urban Finland – and into its soundscape during the 90s. So, to interpret hip hop as solely an expression of contemporary black culture would be misleading – it surely carries different meaning for, say, American black people, and for Finnish youth, but the important thing here is that it does have a meaning for both of them. Yet Hall's (1991: 59) argument that "nearly all the most important work in popular music is

coming from this new recognition of identity" does not meet with Finnish popular music. Perhaps these "new" cultural forms are desirable and used because of their distance and style, rather than their original values. In both cases, however, commodifying the forms in question should not be too difficult, and it might just be that we have to wait a year or two until we have "an authentic Finnish rapper" amongst us.

Still, the example of Waldo does give us an indication that this kind of new identity formation is taking place in Finnish popular music, too. Waldo's *The Look* is comprised of divergent stylistic elements, some of which have a certain "ethnic" flavour to them – it is a Swedish reggae-dance song from Finland. As such it may be closely related to the strategies of multi-culturalism, which, in fact, in their exoticism, are tied to the concept of ethnicity by Hall (1991: 55); he talks about "[t]he exotica of difference". But what happens when all this difference and multi-culturalism ceases to be exotic, and instead begins to be an essential part of identity formation? Here I think that the concept of "new ethnicity" becomes useful. Back (1996: 4) illuminates the concept as follows:

"[N]ew ethnicities" are produced in part through a productive tension between global and local influences. This way of framing ethnicity -- avoids the tendency to define ethnicity in primordial ways and acknowledges the simultaneously local and trans-local nature of identity formation. "New ethnicities" not only challenge what it means to be [a member of an ethnic minority] but they also call into question the dominant coding of what it means to be [a member of the dominating culture]. This opens a range of issues that are related to the way notions of authenticity and belonging are defined within racist and absolutist conceptions of culture --.

I believe that the question of locality and globality in the context of popular music is a very important one, and not least because it is so often difficult to distinguish the local features from the global ones. Sometimes, as I hope the example of *The Look* has demonstrated, this can be done and the tension between the two revealed. I feel that one must always keep in mind that while the general themes of popular music may be global, their most immediate context is local. To quote Mitchell (1996: 142) once more: "[w]hile -- the roots and origins of popular music are always 'elsewhere', and -- local or even national popular music has disappeared, -- re-proposals of foreign musical styles can still express local cultural practices and concerns".

Conclusions

Finally, let me tie up some loose ends I may have left behind. First, although the concept of new ethnicity and the new strategies of identity formation are tied primarily to black minorities by Back and Hall, I feel that they have significance more or less everywhere in contemporary urban environments. Nevertheless, when the concept of new ethnicity is brought into the context of "Western" popular music

some problems may arise. I think the most obvious of these is that "Western" popular music and culture are, in a sense, all about new ethnicity: the strategies of borrowing and recycling behind the formation of new styles and genres is the trademark of popular culture. Nowadays the significance of new ethnicity is of greater magnitude, however, mostly because of gradually disappearing racial boundaries.

But racial divisions and racist attitudes have not disappeared yet, and they are present in the field of popular music, too – how many black speed metal bands do you know, or white gangsta rap artists? Therefore, there may be some constraints for new ethnicity here, and I would not throw the notion of secured Otherness away; in fact, I could just as well talk about "secured new ethnicity". By this I mean that however variable the possible sources of new identity formation may be, they still originate predominantly in Anglo-American popular culture – at least for Finnish popular music. For a really new ethnicity to emerge in Finnish music videos, for example, I guess we will have to wait for the first Somalian-Romany-Sámi artist to come forward in Finland. And that could be a long wait.

The goals and politics of the popular music industry also have an effect on notions of new ethnicity in this context, because as products of that industry, music videos are under a much more restrictive control than contemporary urban culture in general. It is much easier to start walking around in extra-large jeans than to do a music video where people are walking around in extra-large jeans. The industry tries to find a balance between novelty and security, between the original and the traditional, and therefore, I believe, some, if not all, of its decisions can be seen as less than extravagant.

In fact, in a certain sense, it becomes highly problematic to talk about new ethnicity in the context of music videos simply because of their position within the national media discourse against which new ethnicity has been partially defined (see Back 1996: 71). Although music videos may be seen as one of the more "youthful" tendencies operating within that discourse, they nevertheless are under severe control, which can range from explicit censorship to more indistinct public opinion that regulates the popular music industry's operation. Indeed, the whole structure of popular music industry as well as its practices can be seen as a part of this larger national media discourse – or, perhaps they could be more appropriately labelled as one ingredient of an *international* media discourse. And this discourse, in turn, obviously has a great impact on conceptions and perceptions of ethnicity and identity. Still, in the meantime, popular music provides a powerful way for communicating in young people's terms – or is it that this is precisely what *they* (inside the music business) want *us* (outside it) to think? Although many of the emerging artists are in their early twenties, the nubs and swithces on recording tables – and not to mention the telephones on office tables – are under the hands of people more "experienced" with popular music. The more established an area of popular music production is, the more this tends to be the situation.

One could, however, think about popular music as a kind of intermediary in this dialectic between media and new ethnicity. I, for one, cannot see any changes in the future that would be significant enough to alter the structure and operational strat-

egies of popular music industry, not even the Internet. But still, the popular music industry operates largely in the realm of "youth culture", and although it attempts to regulate this culture by various means, it simultaneously works on the terms of that culture. No matter how strong the censorship, something gets always through – the history of pop music is full of comical stories about exclusions made on the "wrong" grounds because of misunderstandings. And when songs and videos are not dealing with narcotics but with more subtle and abstruse issues of identity and ethnicity, for example – which may nonetheless be just as objectionable as drugs in the realm of national politics – the chances that new ideas and attitudes will get through is even greater.

This industrial influence could also be used to explain some of the stylistic solutions of the videos. For example, in the case of Waldo and *The Look*, one could interpret the artist's pronunciation as being "Jamaican" in style, or one could think of it as "yokel-English", "bad" English. This question has been of great importance for the Finnish popular music industry, since the poor pronunciation of English language has been thought of as the major reason why so many Finnish artists have not been able to achieve any significant success abroad. So, in a way, Waldo's strategy to accentuate his words "the Jamaican way" is an attempt to escape this trap: his style of pronouncing has long since been accepted in popular music.

Lastly, I wish to problematise the relationship between the concept of new ethnicity and popular music a little bit further. For occasionally I find it difficult to decide whether one should treat the possible "ethnic" markers as signs of new ethnicity in process, or as merely some stylistic traits from other musical and visual styles and genres. If one is to define some features as quotations, and some others as rules, are these equally significant in respect to new ethnicity? I would answer this question by stating that they both are indicators of an identity, and in that sense, they are equally important. No matter how insignificant they may seem they always participate in identity formation, be it as a part of new ethnicity in process or not.

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Appendix 1. The lyrics of *The Look*.

BRIDGE: (girls:) na na na na...
(Waldo:) she's got the look
(girls:) na na na na...
(Waldo:) she's got the look

VERSE (Waldo): walking like a man, hitting like a hammer
she's a juvenile scam, never was a quitter
tasty like a raindrop, she's got the look

heavenly bound cause heaven's got a number
when she's spinning me around kissing is a colour
her loving is a wild dog, she's got the look

CHORUS: (Waldo:) she's got the look, (girl:) she's got the look
(Waldo:) she's got the look, (girl:) she's got the look
(girl:) what in the world can make a brown-eyed girl turn blue?
(Waldo:) she's got the look
(girl:) when everything I'll ever do I'll do for you, (Waldo:)
she's got the look
(girl:) and I go la la la la la, (Waldo:) look

BRIDGE

watch me now

VERSE: fire in the ice, naked to the T-bone
is a lover's disguise, banging on the head drum
shaking like a mad bull, she's got the look

swaying to the band, moving like a hammer
she's a miracle man, loving is the ocean
kissing is the wet sand, she's got the look

CHORUS

BRIDGE

VERSE: walking like a man
she's a juvenile scam
tasty like a raindrop, she's got the look

heavenly bound
spinning me around
her loving is a wild dog, she's got the look

CHORUS

BRIDGE (x2)

(Waldo:) she's got the look