Emotion Pictures: The Art and Evolution of Music Videos

by

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Class of 2018

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors from the College of Film and the Moving Image

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2018
Acknowledgements

Much like the narrator in that Fatboy Slim song, I have to praise lots of people like I should. First and foremost, I’d like to thank my advisor, teacher, and mentor A.O. Scott, who is both a brilliant and remarkably kind person to work with and learn from. I can’t thank you enough for believing in this wild topic, and for working with care and insightfulness to help shape the thesis into its best possible iteration.

Thank you to the extraordinary film and television professors I’ve been lucky enough to have during my time at Wesleyan: Jeanine Basinger, Scott Higgins, Lisa Dombrowski, Leo Lensing, Marc Longenecker, Amy Bloom, and David Laub. You’re the reason that, when Lorde announced last year that she was coming out with a record called Melodrama, I secretly hoped that she would attach a Douglas Sirkian visual album to it. (There’s still time!)

A special thank you to Lea Carlson, without whom there would likely be no thesis – not mine nor anyone else’s in CFILM. Your expertise on everything logistics-related has kept me from going under more than once, and your tireless compassion is what makes the college so special.

Thank you to my parents, John and Monica Shaffer, for supporting me in all this, even after I decided to dedicate my senior year to studying the Music Video. Thank you to my brother, Matthew, for first introducing me to grunge videos way back when. I love you all so much.

Thank you to David Turner, Simon Vozick-Levinson, Zach Schonfeld, and Austin Brown for patiently answering all questions related to the capital-i Industries (music, media, etc.) that a Wesleyan film major could ask. You all do such fantastic, meaningful work, and I feel so grateful to know you.

Thank you to my housemates, Carli and Molly, without whom Tenby (10b) Fountain would not be a home. Thank you to everyone with whom I’ve worked on the Wesleyan Film Board – you’re all such big, sweet nerds when it comes to movies, and I mean that in the highest regard. Special thanks to Will, Zenezele, Anna, Gabriel, Ariella, Jess, and Sarah for providing moral support and being dear friends in general, even as my ramblings on my thesis topic began to bear more and more of a resemblance to the It’s Always Sunny Pepe Silvia meme.

Finally, in all seriousness, thank you to Drake’s “Nice for What,” Cardi B’s Invasion of Privacy, and Jia Tolentino’s piece for the New Yorker website titled “The Overwhelming Emotion of Hearing Toto’s ‘Africa’ Remixed To Sound Like It’s Playing In An Empty Mall” – all of which were much-needed shots in the arm during the final stretch of this thesis project. My true love might be film, but long live good music and good music writing.
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Introduction

Early last fall semester, on a Friday evening, I watched Beyoncé’s visual album *Lemonade* in a packed movie theater on Wesleyan’s campus. At the time I was frustrated, for reasons that had little to do with the film itself and everything to do with how it was being shown. We – the rest of the Film Board and I – had been unable to acquire a copy of *Lemonade* suitable for projecting onto a large theatrical screen; as expected, there was no 35mm version on film, but even a year and a half after its release there existed no Blu-Ray or DCP copy, either, at least not for public distribution. Eventually, we screened the video by plugging a laptop into the projector and playing *Lemonade* straight from iTunes. Suddenly I, a person who has freely watched two-hour films uploaded to YouTube on her iPhone, became neurotic over image quality. *It’s so pixelated*, I thought to myself, twitching in my seat inside the Goldsmith Family Cinema, as the iconic profile of Beyoncé’s braided head appeared onscreen. The film opens with a muted sound effect that evokes an underwater recording, or a tape being played backwards; I mistook it for filtered, low-quality distortion. *Is the sound is only coming from the front speakers? It’s so LOUD.*

There might’ve been some others in the theater who noticed – film majors, mostly – but I doubt very many people in that theater cared, and not because they didn’t care about *Lemonade*. In fact, as evident by both the energy in the room during the screening and the discussion hosted by Wesleyan’s Women of Color Collective afterwards, this was still a work of art that resonated deeply enough with its audience to earn meticulous attention to its details. I say “still” because, in the barreling vortex
of internet discourse in which we twenty-somethings all live, where there is a
scrambling to overanalyze every aspect of an Online Happening within its first three
days of existence, after which all discussion on the topic ceases, a yearling work of
art can feel ancient. *Lemonade* had been spoken for, it seemed. The hot takes had
been written. And yet here we all were in the theater, witnessing *Lemonade* anew.

I can remember, even now, the sharp intake of collective breath greeting each
musical segment. Each unique facet of Beyoncé was welcomed as a revelation by the
audience, no matter how familiar we all were with the visuals. That shared
experience, already an unusual method of watching a music video, felt particularly
miraculous for *Lemonade*. The fact that the visual album is only available on
streaming services says it all: this is for the individual, to be watched on your laptop
with just you and your thoughts, your experiences, your perceptions of race and
gender and love and marriage and your willingness to interrogate them. Much the
same can be said for all music videos in the digital age, even if most short-form
works are not as thematically rich as Beyoncé’s hour-long masterpiece. Looking back
on it now, I feel that the unanimously effusive response to *Lemonade* in that theater
speaks more to its success, its adaptability, than anything having to do with picture
resolution.

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Music videos, as the dominant narrative of music criticism goes, are dead, if
not in a practical sense than certainly in an artistic one. During the MTV Video Music
Awards two years ago, critic Steven Hyden tweeted, “Giving an award for best music
video in 2016 is like honoring the finest horse and buggy driver in 1970.”

His comment not only implies the drying-up of creative potential within the medium, but also the antiquated nature of how we watch (or used to watch) music videos, that being MTV the television channel. MTV – the version that used to play music, anyways – is outdated, so therefore music videos must be outdated, too. Nevermind that *Lemonade* was released in 2016, or that much of the older forms of visual media we used to consume, including television itself, have migrated successfully to the online digital sphere. From the old guard of music criticism, the consensus appears to be: if music videos aren’t shown in my living room anymore, why should I care?

And as far as the dominant narrative in film criticism goes, music videos exist only to flesh out the mythologies of established film directors. Many of the most celebrated filmmakers of the late 1990s and the 2000s – David Fincher, Spike Jonze, Michel Gondry, Paul Thomas Anderson – either got their start in music videos or have frequently dabbled in the art form throughout their careers (or both, in the case of Jonze). Critics and historians thus often approach a director’s music videos as though they were short-form narrative works or student films: they round out our knowledge of a director’s style, provide us with prototypes and experiments for techniques that would eventually become integral to their filmmaking, and may even allow us to determine whether or not the director was a prodigy. But unlike feature-length narrative films, music videos are by and large not considered worthy of examination on their own terms; they are either seen in the context of a musical artist

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2 And some of my personal favorite directors.
– especially pop stars or iconic bands – or in the context of a director’s entire visual oeuvre.

Additionally, music videos have often been derided for their commercial aspects, and it’s true that their DNA is inextricably tied to their origins as advertisements for pop songs. It may be difficult to pinpoint Queen’s 1975 clip for “Bohemian Rhapsody” as the very first music video – such distinctions are often more fluid than a bullet point on a timeline, and the Beatles had made *A Hard Day’s Night* a decade prior – but nonetheless, in the words of historian Paul Fowles, “Bohemian Rhapsody” is “widely credited as the first global hit single for which an accompanying video was central to the marketing strategy.”³ In other words, the first “real” music video is defined by both its capitalist intent and profitable success. Earlier examples, such as *A Hard Day’s Night* and other Beatles videos, were explicitly promotional items; *A Hard Day’s Night* was a film-length album advertisement, and their shorter videos could be submitted to *Top of the Pops* and other ubiquitous variety shows when the band didn’t want to bother with an in-person performance. (They were known as “film inserts” because they could be seamlessly inserted in between on-air live performances.) Preceding them was Alex Murray and the Moody Blues, whose striking black-and-white video for their 1964 version of “Go Now” predated “Bohemian Rhapsody” by a decade. And preceding that, by over 70 years, was the concept of the “illustrated song:” a performance style featured in vaudeville houses and nickelodeon theaters, in which live musicians were paired with still images projected onto glass slides. This, too, was meant as promotion – not for

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physical recordings, but for sheet music. The music video, the film insert, the illustrated song – none of these was intended as a primary commodity purchased by consumers, like a film or a piece of music, but rather as a promotional byproduct, like a movie trailer. The airplay that videos received on MTV, as well as on its predecessors like *Top of the Pops* and *Video Concert Hall*, was functionally equivalent to commercial radio airplay, exposing viewers and listeners to a song as much as possible in the hopes that they may purchase the accompanying album.

Still, when it comes to the two art forms most closely tied to music videos – film and music – art and capitalism are certainly intertwined. Studio films have always been, and still are, made with the intent of box office success, even if the path to box office success has evolved over the past century. Meanwhile, the gargantuan music industry, largely controlled by three labels as well as a single promoter/venue owner (Live Nation) and mass media corporation (iHeartRadio), remains an unavoidable force looming over every creative decision made by musicians and producers. Structurally, the “big three” labels (Universal, Sony, and Warner) that control 88% of the market are comparable to the “big five” major studios of the classical Hollywood era in movies. In oral histories of music videos and music itself, the industry’s power will often turn up under the vague yet ominous title of “the record company,” an especially infamous phrase in the anti-sellout ‘90s. As digitally downloaded and streamed music dried up the well of physical record sales in the early 2000s, contributing to a rapid decline in video budgets and the eventual death of MTV-as-video-channel, music videos experienced a brief “dark age” period that

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lasted until about 2008, when YouTube became a major platform for the medium. Since then, the types of music videos produced have gradually receded into two camps: the marquee, major label productions, which can still read into the six figures, and the indie/DIY/home video camp, which is almost impossible to examine fully. In this day and age, anyone can make a music video with their iPhone and upload it directly to YouTube for consumption. Nine times out of ten, however, the music videos that get considerable attention or notoriety from the public or the music press are the ones released by major labels, or at the very least, the most prestigious indie labels.

But as we know from *Lemonade* – and “Telephone,” and “Freedom! ‘90,” and “Thriller,” and countless others – major label music videos are capable of producing great art. Sometimes the art is beautifully meshed with commercial intent/manipulation; other times it directly butts heads with what is considered “marketable.” So why do we treat each of these projects as individual successes, or flukes, or nostalgic relics of the past, when the medium as a whole has proved itself as a space for cutting-edge visual artistry?

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The goal of this thesis is to examine music videos as music videos, both analytically and critically. For each video I discuss, I will provide its proper context in the history of music and film, often comparing and contrasting all three art forms, and much of my visual analysis of music videos will be based on film analysis techniques. (After all, both music and film have established histories and practices for criticism, and music video does not.) But my primary focus will be on discussing the
significance of each video within the history of music videos, as well as advocating for the significance of the music video form as a whole. More specifically, I wish to explore the artistic purpose of the music video, the unique effects it can have on the viewer (separate from narrative film), and the ways in which it has evolved alongside digital media as a whole.

The criteria for a “good” music video are hard to pin down, largely because music videos are easily dismissed for the reasons I’ve previously explained. Some argue that music videos can be detrimental to a song; a listener may want to come up with their own personal meaning or associative images for a piece of music, not be “forced” to associate the rhythm and lyrics with a video. The medium can often seem derivative – really, how different can one Britney Spears video be from another? – yet at the same time grossly over-budgeted, at least in its heyday. Certainly, we can name what makes a “bad” music video by its similarity to bad movies: poor editing, poor composition, images that are degrading or humiliating.

However, these characteristics of “badness” are only heightened in a music video: our brains naturally want the visuals of a music video – both the motions happening in each frame and the timing of each cut – to correspond to the rhythm of the music. If they do not sync up with any clarity, we notice it immediately. As for the song’s lyrics, a music video needn’t provide a literal visualization of whatever’s being sung about – think of how restrictive that would be – but generally, we like our videos to convey some understanding of the lyrical content or themes. We like them to understand the song’s essence, if you will; Spike Jonze’s “Buddy Holly” doesn’t literally depict the singer as Buddy Holly or his girlfriend as Mary Tyler Moore, as
the metaphor in the Weezer song goes, but it does depict an idyllic, nostalgic setting (the diner in *Happy Days*) that carries the same romanticized longing for the past.

In considering this relationship between song and video, one can think of a video’s music as its “script” or screenplay. The video’s concept may be informed by a variety of factors planned out before the shot (storyboards, treatments, the public’s understanding of the musical artist/band, etc.), but ultimately it’s the music that informs what will happen onscreen, if it doesn’t completely prescribe what will unfold. While the dozens of videos I examined for this thesis approach the medium in wildly different ways, a common thread among them was that they expanded my understanding of their song, rather than restricting it. They could only do this by understanding the song at its core. Instead of prescribing a 1:1 translation of the music into visuals, they acted almost in conversation with the song’s themes, the work of a director and musician seeing the potential in an already fruitful piece of art.

Music videos are both intimately personal and intensely collaborative works. A running theme of this thesis will be looking at the triangular relationship between musical artist, music video director, and the audience/consumer/viewer of the video, and how that relationship has evolved as videos have migrated from MTV to the internet. At the beginning of the history I cover in this thesis, music videos are watched passively in one’s home; by the end, a video’s success is determined by how much online discussion it generates, including spin-off videos and memes created by random internet users across countless online platforms. In order to examine the full range and scope of the music video, as well as the way their evolution coincides with
the evolution of digital media, my thesis is divided into three parts, each containing 3 or 4 chapters that zero in on a specific video, musician, director, or stylistic trend.

Part 1 concerns the music video’s early history and “golden age,” the 1980s, the height of MTV and a period roughly analogous to the studio era of Hollywood. However, outside of the industry, barely any focus was given to the directors of this era – it was all about the star, the musical artist, singer, or band at the center of each video that would glue eyeballs to television sets across the globe. Chapter 1 outlines the foundational aesthetics of the era through the lens of some of its biggest stars: David Bowie, Michael Jackson, Kate Bush, Prince, and Whitney Houston. Chapter 2 examines an early subversion of the music video format, with New Order’s “The Perfect Kiss,” directed by Jonathan Demme. Chapter 3 analyzes two of David Fincher’s most well-known music videos – Madonna’s “Vogue” and George Michael’s “Freedom! ‘90” – both released in 1990 and both marking a pivotal transition within the form.

Part 2 dives into the 1990s and early aughts, a time when directors were given visible credits on MTV; the cinematic language of music videos turned grittier and more DIY (or, more often, DIY-sembling); and record companies went on extended spending sprees before the industry collapse around 2004, with the creation of iTunes and the rise of digital downloads. In many ways this was the last era to contain a true monoculture around music, and all its auxiliaries, including videos; the subcultures and distinct genres that existed, such as grunge and hip-hop, were clearly defined and had certain aesthetic corollaries attached to them. They also regularly pushed the boundaries of what was considered appropriate for MTV, both in terms of “explicit”
content and in terms of more high-concept material that pushed the boundaries of what a music video could be. Thus, in Chapters 4 through 7 I explore the era through its most notable directors: Mark Romanek, Dave Meyers/Hype Williams, Michel Gondry, and Spike Jonze, respectively.

Part 3 takes a look at where videos are now – “now” beginning with the rise of YouTube as a major music video platform in 2008-2009, and going up right to the present. Chapter 8 will specifically focus on this migration, and how the works of Jonas Åkerlund in particular sold the concept of YouTube as MTV’s replacement. I will then explore a further evolution, from YouTube onto more fractured platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, and how this is shifting the demands and purpose of music videos as the lines between content creator and online viewer continue to blur. Chapter 9 will explore the phenomenon that is Drake’s “Hotline Bling” video – why it became so popular, and how its use of both pictorial and cinematic language highlights a growing trend in music videos to better suit the aesthetics of social media. Chapter 10 will examine the videos of Kendrick Lamar, his meticulous collaboration with directors, and how his political and creative vision has shifted alongside the internet. Finally, Chapter 11 will focus on a handful of new music video auteurs, including Melina Matsoukas, Alan Ferguson, and Grant Singer, and their specific contributions to the medium.

I will return to Lemonade at the end, but for now I’ll just say that the extended critical reaction around it – the think pieces, the talk show discussions, the outpouring of personal histories – remains highly unusual for any music video in any era. This was more than just “buzz” around a video for its goofiness, its coolness, its risqué
qualities; critics and the public alike were treating *Lemonade* like a proper magnum opus. Maybe because it was almost feature-length; maybe because it had an extended rollout through HBO and the streaming service Tidal; maybe just because it was Beyoncé. Whatever the case may be, for the majority of the other videos I discuss here, I had to turn to two types of sources: academic essay anthologies, and reported articles/interviews in online music publications. Both of these types of sources tended to veer towards the very recent; one of my major sources, Carol Vernallis’ *Unruly Media*, was published in 2013 and primarily concerns the early YouTube era of music videos (discussed in Chapter 8) as well as retrospection on the most prominent directors during the ‘90s and early 2000s. One anthology I cite, *Music/Video: Histories, Aesthetics, Media*, was only published last August. Several interviews I utilized in my research are from as recent as January 2018. Could it be that music videos are finally getting the critical attention they deserve? Perhaps, at least in certain circles of academia. On a grimmer note, several of the articles and reported pieces I cite only came about in the wake of the recent untimely deaths of artists like David Bowie, George Michael, and Jonathan Demme, as music publications and other outlets scrambled to highlight the lesser-known aspects to their oeuvres. My desire to write this thesis, I think, partially came about because I believe videos should be honored while their creators are still alive.

In examining music videos through a detailed, critical lens, I hope that I can do just that. Although I chose quite a number of videos to discuss, this is by no means a comprehensive history. I chose each chapter’s subject because I believe it provides crucial insight into the medium’s artistic potential. Most importantly, I chose videos
that I love and that I could never tire of watching – which was great, because I had to watch them quite a lot. It should be noted that, for the purposes of keeping this thesis a relatively reasonable length, I had to keep the focus primarily on American and British pop music. One could write entire theses on the extraordinary video work being done in other countries’ music scenes, especially in K-pop. But with this project, I wanted to hone in on where pop videos began so as to better trace their evolution, not just in their form but also in how the American and British public has reacted to them over time. (With K-pop videos, meanwhile, the form is still relatively new to these audiences, so I felt that it wouldn’t be a fair comparison.)

Music videos are a misunderstood art form, one that has continued to evolve at an unprecedented rate with the changing digital landscape. Like our most adored movies and songs, music videos can make us laugh, cry, gasp in shock. They can offend us and they can provide closure. They can make us empathize with a musician or character or make us hate their guts. (Just ask Lady Gaga.) They exist in a critical web of influences, absorbing most of our media and spitting it back out into the culture as the reflection on our digital landscape. After all, there’s hardly another form whose distribution has changed entirely throughout its 40-year history (from television to online). Through this thesis, I hope to not only explore the music video’s hybrid, complex existence, but to begin to give the form its proper appreciation.

Figure 1.0: Michael Jackson in the “Smooth Criminal” video (1988).
Chapter 1:

Gestures of Theater and Performance in 1980s Music Videos

Music video, even in its first formative decade, was a complicated and often contradictory medium. Videos could bring the experience of seeing an artist or a band live on stage into your living room, while others created an entirely new fantasy altogether. They were fueled by (at the time) abundant record company dollars, yet carried minimalist set pieces that sometimes resembled the theater more than cinema. Nevertheless, much like the dominant pop music of the 1980s, these videos were often lush, vivid, and unabashedly over-the-top.

Much as the term “film noir” is applied to a particular style of the Hollywood studio era, we can outline, in hindsight, a recurring set of motifs and stylistic choices that prevailed throughout the decade’s most popular videos. As was the case with film noir, this was not a categorical “genre” that producers deliberately sought out to define or audiences demanded, but rather a repeated series of creative choices that, taken together across many videos, form a cohesive stylistic unity. Some of these choices include: emphasized gesture, which may or may not involve dancing; lurid, exaggerated colors shot through diffused filters, a la 1950s musicals; nonlinear editing; abstraction and surrealism; and, most importantly, a clear defining of the subject’s “star” identity, which was really the whole purpose of music videos. They were selling a product, and the product was the star. By examining how these motifs are applied to videos from the biggest visual pop stars of the era – David Bowie, Michael Jackson, Prince, Kate Bush, and Whitney Houston – we can begin to
understand how videos grappled with telling a story on film dictated not by a script, nor by dialogue, but by the music itself.

Bowie may be the best jumping-off point for this, in a sort of twisted way. Although Bowie was one of the earliest stars to embrace the video format, going back to his filmed performances of “Space Oddity,” “John I’m Only Dancing,” and “Starman,” his identity was constantly in flux, morphing between personas and creative eras like a chameleon. His videos reflect that instability and Bowie’s own attraction to the weird. “Ashes to Ashes,” co-directed in 1980 by David Mallet and Bowie himself, experimented with solarized colored video at a time when black-and-white or washed-out music videos were the norm. (It was also one of the most expensive videos ever made in the medium’s then-short history, costing around £250,000, but this was a whole year before MTV got off the ground.) As a cohesive work, it’s visually ambivalent, providing no clear narrative beyond watching Bowie and his friends wander around trippy landscapes, in costumes seemingly dashed together from the dressing room floor. “[‘Ashes to Ashes’] incorporates relatively easy-to-read signifiers, such as the harlequin, a priest, a dentist chair, and a modern kitchen, yet in their combination and the fog of the solarized colour they become uncertain, even unsettling,” writes Sunil Manghani. “Somewhat akin to a Rauschenberg flatbed painting, we can grasp its various elements, but our sense of perspective is unsettled through their spatial (and narrative) flattening. We are brought to a crisis in relation to our own orbit of signifiers and order.”

The song’s structure lays the foundation for these seemingly disparate elements. Musically, “Ashes to Ashes” pairs a delicate piano melody and a wonky, springing synth effect with a hard-edged, funk-tinged bass line. The result is a meandering funk groove that constantly bumps up against the song’s more whimsical elements. On top of this are four multi-track guitar synthesizers that play opposing chord inversions. Together they function as a dissonant choir to Bowie’s falsetto lead vocals and deadpan, stream-of-consciousness background vocals, which go off in countless directions during what should be the unifying chorus. Listening to “Ashes to Ashes” feels like a little like watching a ball in a pinball machine, careening in constant motion, kept from losing its momentum by ricocheting off different objects by chance. The song’s lyrics are similarly unhelpful in guiding us towards a linear narrative; described by two of Bowie’s biographers as “containing more messages per second” than any other single in 1980, “Ashes to Ashes” is not so much indecipherable as it is throwing a wrench into Bowie’s previously manifested identities. “We know Major Tom’s a junkie,” Bowie sings mournfully, referencing the once-idealistic Major Tom character of his breakout single “Space Oddity.” “Strung out in heaven’s high/Hitting an all-time low.” That last word is another throwback, this time to Bowie’s 1977 album of the same name, and to the musician’s own internal withdrawal and drug excesses during its recording. While the late ‘70s for Bowie were marked by avant-garde experimentation, the fascism-endorsing Thin White Duke character, and a near-fatal cocaine addiction, the 1980s saw Bowie returning to the mainstream spotlight, no less of an artist but now rendered more visually accessible as though shedding his skin. “Ashes to Ashes” and the album it
appears on, *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)*, could be considered marks of transition, the perfect balance of creativity and commercial viability with ample personal reflection from Bowie himself. “I’ve never done good things/I’ve never done bad things/I never did anything of the blue,” he muses, rendering any drawn conclusions on his art and his life perpetually mutable.

*Figure 1.1: David Bowie’s “Ashes to Ashes” (1980).*

With regards to the video, Julie Lobalzo Wright sees Bowie’s clown persona as a potential anchor, a “drowning Pierrot figure” that would become a recurring character in subsequent works. “This clown figure not only presents a particular character that Bowie portrayed, but also connects his performance style to mime with its emphasis on ‘posing and exaggeration,’” she writes, citing Aileen Dillane’s critical essay on the appearance of Pierrot in Bowie’s videos.7 “With the absence of voice, gesture and posing through the face and body become the central way to convey

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meaning in mime performances.”° Bowie had trained extensively as a mime in the late 1960s – he once performed a routine as an opening act for Marc Bolan – and the influence of mime gesture, costuming, and face acting could be found throughout the entirety of his career.

Gesture unfurls in early 1980s videos like an actor perfecting his blocking; as the medium evolved from filming a band playing their songs onstage into more complex theatrical endeavors, gesture was gradually amplified to fit that heightened fantasy. Bowie, a long proponent of theatrics and alter-egos, was the perfect vessel for such experimentation. He could don different masks, emphasize different gestures, even play around with different gender presentations, and still retain his fundamental star image. Unlike his contemporaries, who might risk alienating their fans simply by choosing the wrong hairstyle, Bowie’s whole shtick was his ever-changing appearance. As his outward persona continuously shifted around him, Bowie managed to stay grounded, as Wright points out, through recurring movements and poses across his videos. For example, in “Ashes to Ashes,” there’s a scene where Bowie-Pierrot walks alongside four costumed performers as a bulldozer trails ominously behind them. Two members of the posse make forward motions with their left hands while their bodies crouch down – a kind of bow that could be read as an acknowledgement to the viewer. “Bowie said the bulldozer symbolized ‘oncoming violence’, but the bulldozer and gesture could also be read as ‘sweeping away of the past,’” interprets Wright – the “past” meaning the “junkie,” Thin White Duke phase of Bowie’s career, or simply the elements of past personas that he now considers

obsolete. In the video for “Fashion,” also released in 1980, Bowie enacts the gesture again, “emphasized through slow motion and the repetition of the gesture three times. It is unsurprising that this gesture would be employed in two videos from *Scary Monsters (And Super Creeps)*, an album which signalled the end of the long 1970s for Bowie and the transition to a more conventional pop star.”

Later, in the 1984 short film *Jazzin’ for Blue Jean*, in support of the single “Blue Jean,” Bowie performs the gesture yet again, this time as the flamboyant, drag queen-like figure of “Screamin’ Lord Byron,” onstage in front of an audience that unanimously repeats the gesture back to him. Wright compares this instance of the “bow” to another gesture of Bowie’s: blowing a kiss at the camera, also while in drag, during the 1979 video for “Boys Keep Swinging.” Both are gestures of solidarity to his fans, demonstrations that they’re all in on the act together, and pointed departures from his reclusiveness during the late 1970s.

Just as gesture often had to fill in for dialogue during the silent film era, gesture in music video may serve the same purpose. But consider that a music video’s “script” is its music. Even when the “plot” or conceit of a video does not strictly follow the narrative expressed in the song’s lyrics, the musical composition will inevitably guide along the video’s performances, production design, and editing. That leaves gesture to function stylistically rather than narratively, informing the video and song’s story rather than existing as the story itself. If done properly, as in the case of Bowie’s videos, gesture may parse out the structure, melody, tone, and message of the song in a way that expands its meaning for the viewer. Synced-up gesture is also,

9 Wright, “The Boys Kept Swinging,” 74.
10 Ibid, 75.
at its core, pleasurable: Just as it can be satisfying to watch a good dancer groove to a rhythm, there’s a certain joy in watching someone in a video clap on a downbeat, or flip their hair on a certain inflection, or otherwise perform a gesture that both responds to and works in harmony with aspects of the song itself. It conveys instinctual understanding of the music in a way that is riveting to see.

As it so happens, good musical films are not dissimilar, and it’s no surprise that many early music videos drew inspiration from the works of Vincent Minnelli and Busby Berkeley. Unlike the majority of films, in which post-production sound is edited to match preexisting footage, musical numbers, like music videos, aim for the inverse: lipsyncing, dancing, gestures, and other motion motifs (e.g. light flashes, falling objects) are meant to match a prerecorded track that will be overlaid in post. Of course, what appeared on MTV in the ‘80s was a far cry and many thousands of dollars away from a studio musical. But one can comfortably trace a line from the luminous, dreamlike extended dance sequences in films like The Band Wagon (1953, dir. Minnelli) to the crudely shimmering pop videos of the 1980s.

Take “Billie Jean,” for instance. There’s so much (easily too much) that can be said about this five-minute-long cultural artifact: that it was one of the first videos by a black artist aired on television\(^\text{11}\); that it inspired a fervid fashion and dance craze among teenagers; that it propelled the already-famous Jackson into an unheard-of echelon of celebrity. But as innovative and, at that time, shockingly radical as the “Billie Jean” video was, it owed much of its appeal to one conservative star of the Hollywood Golden Age: Fred Astaire. Cultural critics, biographers, and film/music

\(^{11}\) Although not \textit{the} first, contrary to popular belief. That would be Musical Youth’s “Pass the Dutchie.”
historians have long stressed Astaire’s influence on Jackson’s dancing: the precision, the fast footwork, the showmanship, and the slight uncanniness in the ability to flow, effortlessly, from one rigid tableau to another, bringing stiff, lanky postures to life like possessed wooden dolls and holding teetering positions with the balance of a gymnast. That last quality made both Astaire and Jackson especially suitable for film, where a freeze-frame of their gestures could carry as much weight as their dancing in motion. “Billie Jean” makes impressive use of this asset, which is why the middle section of the video is what everyone remembers. (MTV’s concerns over the depiction of a black man running from the law potentially turning away viewership were, in the end, unfounded.) Jackson struts down the sidewalk, confronting the camera with intertwined charm and desperation, while his Astaire-esque loafers illuminate each tile he steps on. As he dances, he’s splintered across the screen in blinking quadrants and rectangles, allowing for a fractured depiction that highlights and syncs Jackson’s movements to the song’s rhythm. His twists, stomps, and kicks are slowed-down, replayed twice or thrice in a row, freeze-framed, made to move again. At key moments the video sections off his eyes, his mouth, his thumbs pointing at himself. Behind him, bits of trash fly past an ethereal, purple-and-pink-tinted landscape of hilltops and skyscrapers.

Along with Jackson himself, it’s that color, shot through a diffusing light filter, that evokes a famous sequence from *The Band Wagon* known as the “Girl Hunt,” where Astaire plays a winking version of a suited-up, hard-boiled private eye, opposite the appropriately sly Cyd Charisse as his femme fatale. In spite of its premise, the dance number is the exact opposite of a cynical, black-and-white film
noir. Astaire, in his hunt for a killer, parades through a candy-coated menagerie of theatrical sets: a navy street corner doused in fog and flanked by plywood buildings; a marigold-accented subway station, its tunnel stretching out endlessly thanks to a double-mirror trick; a deep, royal purple lounge space adorned with gaudy neo-Classical sculptures, a glitzy predecessor to the surreal milk bar from *A Clockwork Orange*.

Eventually, Astaire and Charisse wind up in a Pepto-colored speakeasy and, in the ballet’s most well known section, perform an exquisite partners’ duet, before Astaire must take part in an absurdly choreographed gangster shootout. “Girl Hunt” is a steadfast product of its time that is also an inadvertent pioneer: the softly diffused

*Figure 1.2: clockwise from top left, Michael Jackson in “Billie Jean” (1983); a still from the beginning of the “Girl Hunt” montage of The Band Wagon (1953); Fred Astaire during the bar scene in the “Girl Hunt” montage; Michael Jackson in “Smooth Criminal” (1988).*
light, fanciful yet obviously constructed sets, and formally elastic sense of reality would all be appropriated thirty years later for the MTV generation. But it’s the Astaire persona – the man who could get out of any trouble by tapping his feet – that Jackson in particular set out to replicate. Flickers of the “Girl Hunt” choreography appear in the videos for “Beat It,” “Thriller,” “Bad,”\(^{12}\) and especially “Smooth Criminal,” the latter of which features Jackson in a nearly identical white suit and wide-brimmed hat, acting out a warehouse brawl that bears more than a passing resemblance to the speakeasy fight. Portions of the Astaire-Charisse duet, where the two virtuosos dance in unison alongside each other, are echoed beat-for-beat by Jackson and his sister Janet in 1995’s “Scream.” The very conceit of a recognizable triple-threat such as Astaire or Jackson moving through fragmented spaces, strung loosely together by an abstract narrative and directionally determined by its musical score, is the same basic structure that holds most of Jackson’s videos – if not most iconic videos of the ‘80s – in place.

Another notorious work of the era, Prince’s 1984 “When Doves Cry,” also uses Band Wagon-style imagery with a fascinating curveball: interspersed into the video are clips from Purple Rain, the 1984 rock musical film built around the album of the same name, on which “When Doves Cry” appears. Prince famously wrestled creative control away from his assigned video directors, and the production of “When Doves Cry” was no exception. “We’d fly in a director and Prince would whisper in my ear, ‘Get rid of him,’” says Simon Fields, Prince’s video producer at the time. “So I would, and Prince would direct the video himself.” Technically, Fields had hired Larry Williams to direct “When Doves Cry,” but before the very first shot, “Prince

\(^{12}\) The Martin Scorsese-directed video was also inspired in part by West Side Story.
said to me, ‘He doesn’t have to be here.’ So I gave Larry some magazines and he sat outside and did some reading.”

Prince was, in some form or another, a megalomaniac in all his endeavors, and the dueling representations of his persona in “When Doves Cry” are telling in their depiction of Prince’s screen presence. On the one hand, there is the music video’s unique narrative, separate from that of Purple Rain. It begins with Prince in a decadent bathtub scene and ends with him, in costume, performing with his band on a white soundstage. The image is doubled through a split-screen mirror effect. In the middle of this music video narrative, there are unnecessarily long, unedited stretches of clips from Purple Rain. They highlight the scenes of Prince in his biker outfit, forlornly skipping stones in a lake and riding his motorcycle around the outskirts of Minneapolis.

These two narratives in the video appear unrelated. One depicts Prince in all his androgynous glory, bathing in a violet-colored room strewn with flowers and dappled with stained-glass shimmer – the purple lounge set from The Band Wagon on

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ecstasy. The other narrative depicts him as a hyper-masculine rock star, a child of an abusive home, and a scorned lover. Yet these two story threads are the entwined halves of Prince’s star persona, composed in such a way that acknowledges the unexpected ease of holding both in your mind at once. The naked, feline Prince crawling across the gaudy bathroom floor is the same person stoically positioned on a dock, leather jacket collar brushing his cheekbones. The campy dancer in gold leaf and ruffles, shimmying with his correspondingly dressed bandmates, is the same tough guy wrestling his abusive father away from his mother. Neither of these narratives represents reality—anyone who’s seen Purple Rain can attest to that—but it’s that nonlinear quality of video editing that allows Prince to fully represent his dual nature.

Also operating on this duality was Kate Bush, second only to Bowie as the premier avant-garde video star during this era. Her videos, typically stripped-down and containing minimal set pieces, are defined by a complete mastery of color palette and mood: the golden camp of “Wuthering Heights”; the violet dystopia of “Running Up That Hill.” Bush’s outstretched, limber dance style and elongated facial expressions make the experience of watching her feel as though she is reaching out to touch you through the screen. She’d almost be better suited for a Broadway theater, emoting out towards the cheap seats, but on video she aims at your heart directly through the camera, a sensation that’s equal parts awkward and thrilling for the viewer.

In her 1980 video for “Babooshka,” Bush inhabits the two roles of sensualist and terror. The song’s narrative is a fable: an aging woman, fearing that her husband
no longer finds her attractive, sends him love letters under the guise of a younger woman named Babooshka. They eventually agree to meet in person, and the woman disguises herself as her alter ego. The man, upon seeing her, finds “Babooshka” attractive because she reminds him of his wife when she was younger. Thus, the woman sabotages the relationship through her own paranoia. It’s a cruel end to the tale, arguably saying more about the whims of the man than the fears of the woman.

But in the video, the man isn’t even present. Instead Bush, in character as the woman and wearing a long black veil and bodysuit, dances alongside an upright double bass. Over the verse’s creeping melody, she makes stilted, jerking motions in time with the chord changes, curling her fingers into claws and twisting her body around the instrument protectively. Her expressions flash between deviousness, suspicion, and horror, as the lyrics outline her plan to corner her husband. The camera gradually zooms in on her face until the moment the song explodes into the chorus, at which we rapidly zoom out to see Bush in an entirely differently role: the temptress Babooshka, dressed as a mix of Amazonian warrior, Viking shield-maiden, and Russian Lady Macbeth. Backlit by an overblown stage light that shines through her billowing sleeves, she dances more freely but always with a hand on her sword hilt,
her auburn hair framing her head like a lion’s mane. This shocking juxtaposition between the wife and her alter ego makes the wife’s fears even more explicit: somehow, dressed as the confident Babooshka, Bush looks even more paranoid.

When we cut back to her as the veiled older woman during the second verse, she appears to have relaxed considerably – she confidently strums the bass, kisses its neck, and makes other suggestive motions towards it. At one point, as Bush twirls the bass around in a circle, we glimpse the moving image of Babooshka superimposed on its back, but the veiled Bush either doesn’t notice or isn’t concerned. Cutting back to Babooshka during the second chorus, she, too, has grown more confident, holding her sword out like a guitar and swaying her hips to the music. It’s as though the husband’s presence or involvement (or lack thereof) is entirely inconsequential – Bush is in a battle of wits against herself. A brief cut to Bush removing her veil ends in the image shattering like glass, with an accompanying sound effect; the motif repeats over and over again, implying that there is a clear victor in this feud. The video ends with Babooshka, in slow motion, brandishing her sword and wrapping herself in her black cloak. There’s an ambiguity to this ending, made more complicated by the fact that Bush was only twenty-one when the video was filmed; in a feature-length narrative version of “Babooshka,” Bush could not plausibly portray both roles. But here, in the nonlinear music video format, she’s not only able to play both the wife and her alter-ego, but also fully explore their adversarial natures, all without ever requiring them to appear onscreen simultaneously.

More examples of duality would prove to be more personal, more so in hindsight than at the time of video’s initial release. The 1987 video for Whitney
Houston’s “I Wanna Dance With Somebody” opens, in black-and-white, on Houston wrapping up a concert and exiting the stage, to the cheers of her adoring fans. She walks through the back of the theater and out the stage door as the opening bars of the song begin to play. We get quick cuts to close-ups of Whitney, in another place and time: she’s in color, her face and hair glammed up, her manicured hands clapping to the rhythm. Once she lets out that glorious “Whoo!” and the song kicks into high gear, the video cross-cuts between the black-and-white images of Houston leaning against the stage door, and those of Houston and a male partner dancing in color. Gradually, Houston’s rainbow fantasy takes over until we are fully engrossed in it by the time we get to the first verse. It quickly becomes clear that this is what she wishes she could do – go out dancing – after a successful show.

Figure 1.5: Whitney Houston’s “I Wanna Dance With Somebody” (1987).

“I Wanna Dance” keeps its compositions low-budget and simple. Houston and her various male suitors inhabit monochromatic, minimalist sets – for instance, Houston sits at a café table, in front of a coat hanger and a suspended window frame, to evoke a restaurant. On this individual set alone, the video jump-cuts around a dozen times, changing the background color of the set each time and,
correspondingly, the male suitor who’s showing off his dance moves to Houston. Other sets are as basic as the purple backdrop Houston occupies for most of her lipsyncing; another shines a circular window-shaped light on a green backdrop, which a suitor dances in front of. There are graffiti’d fences, infinity mirrors, neon piping, a playful dressing room scene, an Astaire-like dance duet framed on a film strip – all serving to highlight the pure exuberance Houston feels towards this one specific desire. At the end of the video, we’re back to black-and-white, and we see Houston dashing away from her hotel’s entrance to the club next door. As Maud Deitch would write years later for Pitchfork, “On ‘I Wanna Dance With Somebody,’ Houston manages to imbue an otherwise simple, frivolous pop song with a hint of sadness.”14

The accompanying video is drenched in that same melancholy. Houston is simultaneously enlivened and worn-out by her fame, longing for an alternative escape besides shuffling back to the hotel room.

In music video, music is the driver for narrative, and that narrative is almost always predicated on who’s making the music and/or performing in front of the camera. ‘80s videos embodied this self-promotion to a degree that was fun, silly, and surprisingly meaningful; the artists, whether by their own volition or not, seemed to reveal much of their personal selves on MTV. At the very least, they told us not just how they wished to be heard, but how exactly they wished to be seen.

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Chapter 2:
The Unadorned Intimacy of New Order’s “The Perfect Kiss”

Not every video in the 1980s took cues from musicals or the theatre: few musicians could pull off the stage personas of Michael Jackson or Kate Bush, and it wouldn’t be fair to say that all ‘80s videos exhibited lurid, expressionistic palettes and sets. Artists were already coming up with new angles from which to approach the form. David Bowie, for instance, used the art of music video – both in the ‘80s and for decades afterwards, right up to the end of his life\textsuperscript{15} – to expand, subvert, or invert his many public-facing identities and characters. “Boys Keep Swinging” (1979) has Bowie inhabit three drag queen personas, and the 20-minute short film \textit{Jazzin’ for Blue Jean} (1984) depicts his flamboyant alter ego, Screaming Lord Byron, stealing Bowie’s own date away from him. However, Bowie was still utilizing music videos mainly as a prop for stardom, like his costumes and live performances. Videos like “Boys Keep Swinging” and \textit{Jazzin’ for Blue Jean}, strange and gender-bending as they are, continue to market Bowie as a commercial entity, albeit a highly experimental one. Furthermore, it wasn’t long before Bowie’s elaborate costumes and personas, as well as his mime-like performance style, became the norm for pop videos.

New Order, the English new wave band born from the ashes of Joy Division, took a much different approach to music video, beginning with their 1985 video “The Perfect Kiss,” directed by Jonathan Demme. Music video scholar Andrew Burke writes of this transformation:

\footnote{15 With the heavily symbolic videos for “Blackstar” and “Lazarus.”}
The band was keen to avoid the conventions of the pop promo feeling that, even in the few short years that had passed since the 1981 launch of MTV in the United States had exponentially increased their production, the form had ossified into a more or less standardized set of tropes and images that revolved around mimed performance and sexualized imagery. Directed by Jonathan Demme, the video for ‘The Perfect Kiss’ would avoid these clichés by zeroing in on the band itself as they performed the track live in the private, intimate space of their practice room. The video is remarkable for several reasons, not least its extraordinary length. Clocking in at over nine minutes, ‘The Perfect Kiss’ far exceeded the conventional length of the mid-1980s music video and offered no real narrative, drama, or spectacle to justify this duration.16

At the time, Burke notes, Demme would have been an unusual directorial choice for this type of video. Demme was best known for 1980’s Melvin and Howard, “a Preston Sturges-inspired comedy that traces the ups and downs of everyman Melvin after a chance encounter with the billionaire Howard Hughes in a Nevada desert.”17 Not exactly a portrait of an arty, self-serious rock band in the rehearsal studio.

But about a year before he directed “The Perfect Kiss,” Demme had filmed the Talking Heads performing over three consecutive nights in Los Angeles. The footage would eventually be edited into the seminal concert film Stop Making Sense. “As distinct and different as the Talking Heads film is from the New Order video,” writes Burke, “both are very much characterized by a desire to capture a band playing live, but to do so without resorting to rock cliché or the basic vocabulary of pop performance that plagued so many clips in the early days of video.”18 Taken with New Order’s other ‘80s videos – “Bizarre Love Triangle,” “True Faith,” “Touched by the Hand of God,” and “Blue Monday ’88,” to name a few – it’s apparent that the

17 Ibid, 80.
18 Ibid.
band wished to test the boundaries of what a music video could be, and how a song’s “script” could outline and guide visuals. But the aforementioned videos extracted meaning from their songs through surreal imagery: discontinuous abstract drawings, miming French artists, the William Wegman Weimaraners. “The Perfect Kiss,” meanwhile, portrays the band unadorned, in a practice session, with none of the theatrical bells and whistles commonplace in that era.

The rehearsal stage where Demme and the legendary cinematographer Henri Alekan\(^\text{19}\) shot “The Perfect Kiss” is about as ordinary a set-up as you can get. Aside from the faint purple glow that emanates from the walls, the space is little more than a soundproofed rectangle. But the video is less about the space itself than how Demme defines it for the viewer. There are no wide shots of the rehearsal space until more than halfway through the nine-minute video; for the first five minutes, each band member is filmed individually in tight close-up shots, with no sense of where they are within the space or in relation to each other. This is a crucial choice on Demme’s part: through visual composition, he isolates each instrumental portion of the highly modular song and defines each person’s role within the band.

Additionally, these are long takes for a music video, on average lasting around 10 seconds – one shot of Bernard Sumner goes nearly 50 seconds without a cut. These drawn-out, sometimes banal close-ups, with no wider shots that depict the space in its entirely, help generate tension within the video: as viewers, we expect to see a wide shot that establishes and defines the space early on, as typically happens when a movie or video introduces a new location. We want to see where the band is,

\(^{19}\) A sample of Alekan’s résumé: Jean Cocteau’s *Beauty and the Beast* (1946), William Wyler’s *Roman Holiday* (1953), and Wim Wenders’ *Wings of Desire* (1987).
where the members are in relation to one another, how large or small the space is, etc. But with each cut we instead are brought to a new close-up, heightening the anticipation to see the room in its entirely. That reveal doesn’t come until midway through the video, long after it’s expected. The longer Demme holds out on showing us what should have been the establishing shot of the rehearsal room, the higher our anticipation is to eventually see that shot. This remarkably keeps us invested throughout the nine-minute video, far longer than our usual three-to-four-minute attention spans.

“The Perfect Kiss” opens on an atypical title card: in glowing typeface, the name of the song and a catalogue number (Fac 321) for the band’s label, Factory Records. These appear to the left and right of a glowing purple monitor displaying a time code. As Burke points out, this title card would have been noticeably different from the standard lower-left credits at the beginning of most MTV videos. It “at once signals the liveness of the performance that follows but also, in a self-reflexive fashion, reveals something of the mechanics of music video production itself…[It] conforms to and consolidates the identity of both band and label.”20 Factory Records, founded and managed by Sex Pistols booker Tony Wilson21, was rooted in “punk’s suspicion of capitalism and the corporate,” but by its very nature as a label it had to make its production commodifiable. The title card could be seen as a reference to that inherent ideological tension. But it’s also a comment on New Order’s identity as a band, transitioning the grim moodiness of Joy Division to “part of the machine,” sonically if not straight-up commercially. The title card sets up “The Perfect Kiss” as

20 Burke, “The Perfect Kiss,” 81-82.
21 Wilson is often credited for booking the band’s first television appearance, on his short-lived but influential musical variety show So It Goes.
leaning into, rather than shying away from, New Order’s liberal use of electronics as part of their cutting-edge artistry, rather than as a flaw. Taken together with the rest of the video, as I’ll explain further, it links their use of electronics to their humanistic existence as a band and as people.

![Figure 2.1: each of the four members of New Order in close-up during “The Perfect Kiss” (1985).](image)

The video fades from the title card to a close-up of Gillian Gilbert’s face, stepping towards the camera and triggering the opening drum sequence that starts to play. (We can’t see her hands, but by her glancing downward, it’s implied that she is pressing a button on a machine and that the sound is diegetic.) The video then cycles through each band member looking awkward and anticipatory as the music gradually builds up. Bernard Sumner, who performs vocals and guitar, nods nervously to his bandmates at the mic. Stephen Morris “looks furtively from side to side” and glances
down at his keyboard, an instrument that we don’t get to see until much later.\textsuperscript{22} Peter Hook, guitar pick between his lips, looks down as he plucks a distorted bass line, and in the next cut – Hook’s fingers on the bass strings – we finally witness an instrument being played. We then get another close-up of Gilbert, looking up at something out of frame and reaching her arm in its direction, just as Hook’s bass fades out. In the next shot we see her twist a knob on a mounted Voyetra-8 synthesizer, launching a modulated line of electronic notes. We get a full eight seconds of Gilbert staring up at the knob, impassively, as though counting the bars of music in her head. There’s another shot of Sumner fussing around at the mic, then back to Gilbert looking up before she moves out of the frame, then a low-angle shot of Gilbert stepping up to her keyboard and, finally, a close-up of Gilbert playing a synth line on the keys while a new version of Hook’s bass line plays over it. We get another close-up of Hook’s hands before cutting to Sumner singing the first verse. Burke writes, “There is little joy or enthusiasm visible in these shots, only nervousness, concentration, and focus. The static formalism of Demme’s framings accentuates this lack of affect and situates the band as part of a longer history of electronic music on film and television, most notably exemplified by Kraftwerk, in which images of technical control and sonic precision take precedence over the expression of emotion or the impulse to dance.”\textsuperscript{23}

With this reverence for technical control, Demme is able to influence the audience in two important ways. One is that he makes us appreciate the care, focus, and attention to precision that the band infuses into their music. Alekan filmed the video on 35mm stock and used special lenses in order to soften the band’s faces,

\textsuperscript{22} Wilson claims that Demme was particularly excited to film Morris at his usual drum kit, and that he was “dismayed” to find out that all the drums in the song were programmed.  
\textsuperscript{23} Burke, 82.
viewing each one “not as a vehicle for the excessive expression of emotion but as a surface that communicates both the dignity and humanity of the individual.”^24 The uncomfortable expressions on Sumner and Morris are match-cut with Hook’s industrious bass-playing. Whereas Sumner and Morris look nervous, Hook is deep in concentration, clearly not giving thought to much of anything other than the notes he is playing. This concentration is then reflected back in the faces of Gilbert, Sumner, and Morris during their subsequent close-ups, as they learn to ignore the camera in the room and turn their full attention to their instruments.

![Figure 2.2: wide shot of the rehearsal space, first seen at the 5:24 mark in “The Perfect Kiss” (1985).](image)

The band members may occasionally break focus by glancing at each other, particularly when their two instruments are working in harmony (i.e. Sumner and Hook’s dueling guitar-and-bass parts at the end). At one point, when Hook takes a break from the bass to wallop on a drum machine, he looks at the camera in askance over the lip of the surface pad, before walking back to his guitar. Sumner, too, timidly meets our gaze during his first close-up. But though Demme is known for

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^24 Ibid, 83.
encouraging this type of direct address – and later would use it to great effect in The Silence of the Lambs – he doesn’t overdue it here. The glances are only a byproduct of the band’s stress and apprehension, and they’re there to suggest that whatever relationship they have to their audience may be distracting from what they consider to be the real work: playing their music.

Which is the second way that Demme manipulates the viewer: by teasing us with occasional close-ups of the band members’ hands playing their instruments, all while the song builds up, flatlines, then builds up again, Demme makes us want to watch them perform. With minimal gestures – the light touch on a keyboard’s keys, the twist of a tiny synth knob, every individual string pluck – the band lures us into the same deep focus towards their playing that they themselves are experiencing. Last year for Billboard, in the wake of Demme’s passing, Andrew Unterberger wrote of the video:

Live videos are traditionally geared to glamorize the artists and bands they film, to capture them at the peak of their live powers and generally make them seem like superstars. "The Perfect Kiss" has no such illusions or ambitions. It captures an extremely apprehensive-looking New Order performing in exceedingly workmanlike fashion, without an audience to hype or anything but the camera to impress…creating an uncomfortable intimacy that feels less like witnessing a great band at work than eavesdropping on a co-worker's conversation from another cubicle. What all of this serves to do, though, is to make the band seem profoundly human…there's an exquisitely powerful rawness to the whole experience, something sweated and bled and earned.25

This isn’t a Van Halen or AC/DC concert video; we’re meant to view New Order neither as rock gods nor as our new robot overlords. “The Perfect Kiss” captures an

(ironically) imperfect rehearsal of a signature song – a youth anthem that, like all of New Order’s best work, excels in its empathy. When the studio location is finally seen in its entirety, halfway through “The Perfect Kiss,” it feels like an affirmation of this goal. It’s as though New Order have earned the right to speak to such intimate themes of human experience.

It should be noted that fans and historians alike have long disputed the details of those themes. Some interpret “The Perfect Kiss” to be about the AIDS crisis, and its associated conflict between open liberation and slow-moving dread. (“Pretending not to see his gun/I said ‘Let’s go out and have some fun!’”; “Then a fight breaks out in the street/You lose another broken heart in a land of meat/My friend, he took his final breath/Now I know the perfect kiss is the kiss of death.”) Others believe it references the suicide of Joy Division’s lead singer, Ian Curtis, and the video arguably points to this latter interpretation. While Sumner and Hook are rocking out together near the end of the video, they’re each captured in medium shots that reveal more of their immediate surroundings than we’ve been privy to. Behind Sumner on the left, a long-haired man, presumably a studio engineer, peers out at the band through an opaque dividing glass. Due to the square light pattern reflected on the surface, it’s hard to tell at first if the man is really on the other side of the glass or if he, too, is a reflection, someone in the recording booth with the band. On the wall to Sumner’s right, prominently displayed, is a Joy Division poster. Cook’s medium shot is composed much like his bandmate’s. A poster hangs behind Cook to his left, but it’s out of focus and difficult to read. To his right, framed between Cook’s body and a programming machine that cuts across the middle of the shot, stands a ghostly figure
in a doorway. Bright light streams into the room, rendering the man as little more than a silhouette, but with his haircut and long-sleeved dress shirt he bears more than a passing resemblance to Curtis. By all accounts, the man is just another studio manager or friend of the band. However, Demme’s decision to place him within the doorframe, mirrored with the Joy Division poster and the dimly lit man behind the sound booth, makes him look like an eerie depiction of Curtis from beyond the veil.

![Figure 2.3: the mirrored shots in “The Perfect Kiss” (1985).](image)

This is the only theatrical detail in the entire video, and the subtlety works in its favor. “The Perfect Kiss” is a video of unexpected depth that questions why we watch music videos in the first place – to experience joy in watching performance? To marvel at the technical mastery of the musicians? To find catharsis? It could be all three, and more – New Order and Demme were perceptive enough to explore these new avenues for the medium. As music videos approached the new decade, auteur directors gradually rose up within the industry, and musicians began to think seriously of how to not just accurately portray, but also subvert, their star images. “The Perfect Kiss” reimagined the form as a successful creative conduit for both parties.
Chapter 3:
How “Vogue” and “Freedom! ‘90” Altered the Video’s Star Image

Perhaps the most notorious music video director to emerge during the 1980s was a young man named David Fincher. In 1983, after working as an assistant cameraman on Return of the Jedi and Temple of Doom, he co-founded Propaganda Films, a highly successful production company that specialized in short-form video; over the course of seven years, it was estimated to have produced a third of all music videos in the American market. Once acquired by PolyGram Filmed Entertainment in 1991, Propaganda went on to house the works of Spike Jonze, Michel Gondry, Mark Romanek, and other prominent auteur directors for the next decade.

But let’s back up a bit. In 1990, Fincher was developing more cinematic ambitions, but it would be another two years before he’d make his feature-length debut (Alien 3) and even longer for him to achieve critical success (with 1995’s Se7en). Nevertheless, two of the videos he directed that year – Madonna’s “Vogue” and George Michael’s “Freedom! ‘90” – resembled films in a way that stood out to the average MTV viewer, mainly because they resembled films that weren’t directed by Minnelli or Demy. “Vogue” was a musical done in film noir; “Freedom! ‘90” was modern crime drama, action, and thriller rolled into one. These videos became massive hits, earning endless rotations on MTV/VH1 and rising to near-instantaneous pop iconography. In spite of their massive success, it’s little surprise that Fincher turned his back on short-form projects following their release – he wanted to make movies.
But it’s a bit of a shame that Fincher has only sporadically returned to videos. (His most-notable post-1990 work, the 2013 video for Justin Timberlake’s “Suit & Tie,” won a Grammy for Best Music Video and a VMA for Best Direction.) It’s true that both “Vogue” and “Freedom! ’90” contain that nebulous visual quality known as “cinematic,” but more importantly, the two videos marked radical changes to how a pop star could be represented onscreen and, almost contrarily, paved the way for auteur directors like Fincher within the medium. Auteurs existed before his time (e.g. Dave Mallet, Steve Barron, Russell Mulcahy26) being the most significant examples, but they were not given as much individual attention by the public, and certainly weren’t held up in higher regard than the stars at the center of their videos. So while Fincher certainly opposed making a long-term career out of music videos, his contributions to the medium through both his own directorial work and his steering the helm at Propaganda Films quietly petitioned for the director’s artistic significance beyond industry circles. (It was in 1992 when MTV finally added directors’ names to their onscreen video credits.) As much as these two videos from 1990 worked to reshape how audiences saw both Madonna and Michael, what they were really doing was highlighting the creative potential of the people behind the camera, how they had the unforeseen power to manipulate viewers’ perceptions of their favorite stars.

By the time Fincher agreed to direct “Vogue,” he had already developed a stylistic language. Looking across Fincher’s videos from the early ‘80s onwards, one notices a three-dimensionality to the human figures, a rare characteristic for music videos in this decade. This was in large part to Fincher’s use of dynamic shadows and

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26 Mulcahy directed MTV’s first broadcast, The Buggles’ “Video Killed the Radio Star,” as well as endearing classics like Bonnie Tyler’s “Total Eclipse of the Heart” and a majority of Duran Duran’s early videos (“Hungry Like the Wolf, “Rio,” etc.).
lighting on his performers’ faces. He often utilized reverse key lighting, illuminating the part of the face furthest away from the camera and excluding the rest in shadow. Derived from classic film noir lighting, this technique can be used as shorthand for depicting complex, secretive characters, or simply intriguing the audience into wanting to get a better look at the actor. Fincher contrasted his reverse-key figures with more luminous actors or objects within the same project, in order to create a sense of dynamism. The jacked-up male factory workers in Madonna’s “Express Yourself,” for instance, look like Greek statues compared to Madonna herself, who is beautiful but bathed in overexposed lighting. Given that “Express Yourself” celebrates female pleasure and not going for “second best” when it comes to one’s love life, it’s an appropriate contrast: the men in the video are objectified, whereas Madonna is portrayed as a literal deity.

Fincher also exhibited a knack for set design; the soundstages in “Express Yourself,” and especially in “Vogue,” feel at once contained and highly expansive. Fincher achieves this by manipulating depth of field and using shadow as a backdrop – the omission of a physical wall makes it appear that the set goes back further than the naked eye can see. His videos also contain steady, level tracking shots – some of the best dolly work in music videos – that first open on a new location as a contained or boxed-in room, and then slowly reveal its multitudes by moving the camera. Both of these qualities are present in the opening shot of “Vogue”: a curtain of feathers lifts up, revealing a portrait of a lyre-playing woman on the left, and a tuxedoed dancer posing on the right. Moody orchestral synths drone steadily in the background.

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27 This would later influence Mark Romanek’s “compact large-scale” approach to set design.
28 Perhaps a subtle reference to Busby Berkeley musicals.
Behind the portrait is another painting on an easel, and beyond that, darkness. But the shot doesn’t remain on this tableau for long, as the camera is already moving once the feathers lift up. We glide on to another dancer in pose, this time in front of a statue. The image gradually dissolves into another tracking shot, moving left instead of right. We catch a glimpse of the dancer’s face before dissolving to yet another tracking shot, another dancer, another painting. In addition to building a purgatorial world where glamorous Hollywood stardom and artistry lives on, this intro solves an obvious conundrum that comes with the “Vogue” video’s premise: how do you depict stationary works of art as part of a dynamic moving image set to an upbeat club track? Before the song’s rhythm and groove have even begun, Fincher helps us anticipate “Vogue”’s kinetic energy through these smooth yet abundant dissolves. It’s akin to the moment when a noir villain confronts the hero with a loaded gun, and though their dialogue is steady and measured, we know there’s about to be a shootout.

In this way, Fincher’s filmmaking style actually shares qualities with voguing, the dance style that inspired “Vogue” the song and which is featured heavily in the video. Madonna took the song’s title, and the video’s chief inspiration, from the signature performance style of New York’s ballroom culture; two of the dancers that appear in “Vogue,” Luis Camacho and Jose Gutierrez, were active ball performers in real life, members of the Xtravaganza house who were featured in the documentary Paris Is Burning that same year. That fact that “Vogue” is equally infused with classic Hollywood imagery is another aspect of ball culture – the appropriation of old glamour, putting on a mask of wigs and glitter in order to become someone else.

What’s different here is that Madonna borrows pieces of ball culture’s aesthetics with
no acknowledgement of its history or socioeconomic dynamics. Her dancers are in
tuxes, not sequined hand-me-downs. The essential queer aspects of ball culture, too,
and its foundations in black and Latinx communities, are muted: “It makes no
difference if you’re black or white, if you’re a boy or a girl.” What does get preserved
– arguably, the only pure aspect of ball culture that remains in the video – is the
voguing dance itself: the fluid interpretive poses and gestures, seamlessly
transforming from one tableau to the next. The style’s name may have originated
from the stoic poses on Vogue magazine covers, but in motion, vogueing functions like
a film strip; each tableau acts like a single frame, and a talented dancer can flow from
pose to pose in such a way that they are, at once, individually defined and working in
tandem to create a moving image. For all the video’s flattening of the subculture, it
does manage to uplift what makes the dance so sharply unique: Fincher’s editing
connects still tableaus with fluid motion, cross-cutting and dissolving with such
smoothness that it’s possible to simultaneously view “Vogue” as each separate frame
and absorb it as a whole.

Figure 3.1: stills from “Vogue” (1990).
How Fincher chooses to frame Madonna in this environment adds to this dichotomy. The first glimpse we catch of her is not of her iconic face, nor her equally iconic dancing, but her back, beads of diamonds running down her spine as she sensually careens to “Vogue”’s opening beat. When she whips around to deliver the deadpan “Strike a pose,” we instantly recognize her as styled after the photographs of Marilyn Monroe, Grace Kelly, and other iconic actress who are synonymous with the Hollywood studio era. But Madonna in motion has characteristics of a different kind of movie actress – not the star ingénue, although she is very much the sun around which everything else in the video orbits, but a kind of guiding musical spirit. The vogue dancers are not introducing her to the magic of voguing or glamour; she’s introducing those concepts to the wider world, with the vogue dancers backing up her argument. She’s more like Lumiere offering hospitality in “Be Our Guest” than like Belle wanting “adventure in the great wide somewhere,” and it isn’t a new role for the pop star, either; Madonna sang from a comparable position of authority on “Express Yourself,” but here she doubles down through her gestures. Watch as she twirls her hand, walking up a dais as she effortlessly lip-syncs, “All you need is your own imagination/So use it, that’s what it’s for.” In moments where she’s directly addressing the camera, or looking up towards where we might imagine a godly spotlight to hang from, she’s always addressing the listener in second person, as though we the audience are the young ingénue who has to learn how to become a star, how to worship the holy trinity that is lights, camera, action.

“Vogue” is perhaps most astonishing for its least obvious feature: there’s not a single bad cut in the entire video. Fincher knows exactly which beat or note or vocal
inflection desires a change of scenery. He manipulates the gestures of the dancers and Madonna herself to curl around the phrases and rhythms underscoring each moving image. (Part of why the infamous “cone bra” shot is so memorable is that every movement in the shot – the tracking cam, the dancers opening their jackets, the faceless Madonna swaying – is timed perfectly to Madonna’s vocal affect.) Along with the set and costume design, the editing works to express the common ground among disparate styles and settings of performance: studio films, gay ballrooms, fashion runways. It cuts between a catwalk dance and a man smoking like Lauren Bacall; a photoshoot with a Greek column and a synchronized vogue dance; lithe models, their open dress shirts billowing in the wind, and an (unauthorized) recreation of Horst P. Horst’s 1946 photograph *Carmen Face Massage*. Quick clips of Madonna’s lipsyncing visage are inserted between these comparisons, functioning as connective tissue. My personal favorite cross-cuts are between Madonna and two of her female backup dancers, framed as back-to-back singing busts who perform as an echoing Greek chorus. We see them no more than five times, and always very briefly, but even so Fincher manages to characterize them as enraptured, slightly mischievous sidekicks. (If we’re going along with our Disney comparison here, they’re not unlike the Siamese cats from *Lady & the Tramp.*) Fincher wisely reserves the most elaborate choreography, including the duets and group dances, for the song’s chorus; during the verses he shows the dancers in isolated, anticipatory tableaus. When Madonna name-checks a long list of movie stars and starlets during the bridge, every shot is exclusively on her, in elaborate headshot scenarios inspired by real photoshoots of the 1930s and 1940s – satin backgrounds, headwraps, reflective tables.
Madonna had visually aligned herself to classic Hollywood in previous videos, most famously with her *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* mimicry in “Material Girl” (dir. Mary Lambert), but here she has matured. She’s an experienced performer, a gay icon, and a sex goddess rolled into one, more myth than woman at this point, and Fincher knew he had to present her as such while also making her seem tangible, someone to aspire to while knowing full-well you could never achieve her greatness. “Vogue” became an instant phenomenon in that, like Madonna herself, it presented itself to have emerged fully formed, tidied and coiffed, not a hair out of place, to personally hold your hand and guide you towards stardom. Fincher’s direction makes the star propaganda of the video feel more deliberate and personably acute; it may be correct to refer to “Vogue” as “cinematic” in a purely superficial way, but it adapts from cinema the ability to emotionally manipulate its viewer through a layered narrative. Madonna follows a long tradition of stardom, it tells us, and while you revere her for how indelibly special she is, you can be part of that narrative, too.

“Freedom! ‘90” had that same perfectionist’s touch for a very different star, with a very different purpose. By 1990, between his stint in Wham! and a successful early solo career, George Michael had already established a definitive, yet one-note, music video persona. He was a pop crooner, a rich playboy on a yacht, a bounding ball of energy in tube socks prancing around with a guitar. In other words, every role he portrayed onscreen could be quickly reduced to two dimensions, figuratively and literally; nowadays, the flatness of Michael’s videos looks off-putting and cheap, a direct address in front of a plain, greenscreened background that makes him look like a paper doll. Even videos that depict Michael among three-dimensional exteriors
come across as banal: “Careless Whisper,” for all its melodrama and steamy trysts on a yacht, by and large shows Michael singing in front of a nighttime cityscape, sometimes just a plain black void, strung about with ropes and wooden banisters to vaguely resemble a dock. In a similar vein, “I Want Your Sex” juxtaposes lascivious close-ups of Michael’s then-girlfriend Kathy Jeung in lingerie with shots of Michael hammily lip-syncing the song’s hook. His single cross earring, the one hint at Michael’s individuality, feels almost like an afterthought. But no performative masculinity is as blatant as that in “Faith,” in which Michael, spruced up in Ray-Bans and Levi’s and cowboy boots, growls and twangs in front of a jukebox. There’s a wild dissonance in seeing a video trying so desperately to ooze male presence and heterosexuality, all while the camera lingers on Michael’s sashaying denim behind. In hindsight, it’s remarkable that very few people at the time saw the video as Michael’s way of sashaying out of the closet.

The album that “Freedom! ‘90” originates from, *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. I*, was intended to be a radical departure from, and reflection on, Michael’s previous work: it largely contains folk-rock ballads – “Freedom! ‘90” is by far the funkiest song on the track list – and critiques the pressures and limitations of stardom, which by then had worn Michael down considerably. “At some point in your career, the situation between yourself and the camera reverses,” he said in a 1990 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*. “For a certain number of years, you court it and you need it, but ultimately, it needs you more and it’s a bit like a relationship. The minute that
happens, it turns you off…and it does feel like it is taking something from you.”

Although *Listen Without Prejudice* was a huge hit in the UK, it sold an underperforming eight million copies worldwide (compared to twenty million copies for 1987’s *Faith*). Michael’s disappointment with the record’s disappointing sales eventually snowballed into his legal battles against Sony Music, citing a lack of creative liberties. But back in the middle of *Prejudice*’s starry-eyed release cycle, Michael wished to make an even grander statement in defiance of his established identity: there would be no music videos for the album’s singles. “Videos force you to think of [songs] in a certain way rather than being free to interpret them however you like,” he remarked at the time. “When you are trying to express things with metaphors and much more subtlety, that’s when you are doing a disservice by making a video. I don’t want to say I won’t do another video ever, but I won’t do one for the foreseeable future.”

Predictably, the record company would have none of that; two months after Michael’s “no videos” declaration, the video for “Freedom! ‘90” premiered on MTV.

Though Michael relented and gave in to Sony’s demands for a visual product, he staunchly refused to appear in the video himself. Around the same time, he was exposed to a now-iconic February 1990 cover of Vogue, featuring five of the biggest supermodel names right as the term “supermodel” was becoming colloquial. Michael recruited the same five models to “portray” him onscreen for his video, although they wouldn’t be dressing up as Michael – part of the appeal was that they would very

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30 Ibid.
much look and act like themselves. They would, however, be lipsynching to some of the most personal lyrics of his career so far.

To me, the most noticeable feature of the video is its color. In pretty much all of his works that aren’t in black-and-white, Fincher has a tendency to drench the palette in blue and yellow-orange, and the various tints, contrasts, and combinations they can accrue. For other filmmakers, especially in the video industry, that palette wasn’t unheard of during the “Freedom! ’90” era. “[I]t was common to see very bluish diaphanous cloth from drapery and orange tints from fire or candlelight in eighties and nineties videos,” writes Carol Vernallis, comparing the lighting in Fincher’s videos to that in Bonnie Tyler’s “Total Eclipse of the Heart.” Yet what sets Fincher apart is that he approaches the two shades as though like they were black-and-white lighting in a film noir – highly evocative, often sumptuous, and foregrounded in a character’s worldview and emotional state rather than in their literal physical location.

There’s a deep sensuality to how Fincher illuminates the vacant, industrial London loft in which the five models – Linda Evangelista, Naomi Campbell, Christy Turlington, Cindy Crawford, and Tatjana Patitz – act out performative versions of Michael and of themselves. The opening shot fades in on a boiling tea kettle and travels, impossibly, through the back frame of a chair to focus in on Linda, who is propped up against a wall. There’s an acute sensation of moving underwater. (Also, a radical departure from the static, two-dimensional cinematography in George Michael’s earlier videos.) The sound of a dripping faucet accentuates this fluidity, and

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the overwhelming blue tint only intensifies when Linda hits a button a remote, powering up her CD player. Beams of laser light, sapphire and futuristic, shine onto a spinning copy of *Listen Without Prejudice*, and the video transitions into the song’s opening bars. Later in the video, Fincher uses more ephemeral shades of blue to evoke a nascent, royal mood, such as when Christy, towering and wrapped in a linen bedsheets, strides across a vacant living room towards an open window, the sheet trailing gracefully behind her. The shot is cross-cut with clips of Naomi, glowing in amber and wearing headphones, dancing carefree around the loft, telephone receiver dangling from her hand. The phone’s coils snake their way over fiery puddles, in contrast to Christy’s stoic posture and cold, inscrutable expressions. With the warmer tones, Fincher again shows he can use the same form of light for a different mood and purpose: like Naomi, he shoots Tatjana in yellow tint, but it’s muted this time, more washed-out and dusted with grime. Appropriately, she inhabits a smoking, wistful *femme fatale* role, in complete opposition to Naomi’s character. Tatjana is introduced as sulfur-tinged water cascades behind her, flowing down a shimmering metallic wall.

In one of the video’s most famous scenes, Fincher combines his two primary colors for Cindy Crawford. She lies naked in a blue (empty) bathtub framed by swelling curtains, her face lit in a warm glow, occasionally masked by wisps of gray fog. It’s a striking shot in that it conveys traditional glamour, sleazy voyeurism, and a blatantly artificial quality all at once. “I was sitting on an apple box, to lift me up, and I had glycerine all over me, to look wet,” Crawford later recalled to director Jake Nava, who wanted to replicate the shot for a Beyoncé video. “Was it comfortable? Models don’t ask themselves that question. If you’re not passing out, it’s

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32 It actually took up most of the wardrobe budget.
comfortable.” A similar moment occurs during the bridge, when Christy is on all fours, masked by shadow but for a sliver of yellow light that she moves her face in and out of, at different points shining on her eyes and lips. During the final, rousing chorus, Linda buries her head in her sweater and the camera films her in close-up underneath; her face reaches up in exhilaration, the light dappling her skin.

Figure 3.2: the models in “Freedom! ‘90” (1990), clockwise from top left: Linda Evangelista, Naomi Campbell, Tatjana Patitz, Cindy Crawford, and Christy Turlington.

Marks and Tannenbaum, *I Want My MTV*, 443.
When it comes to visual experimentation, Fincher has always been a game-for-anything filmmaker – he helped develop an underwater camera for one of his earlier videos – but the value of these shots goes beyond eye-popping aesthetics. Michael’s lyrics, the words that appear to come straight from the models’ mouths, are explicitly about destroying concepts of stardom and material value in favor of artistry and happiness. “Gotta have some faith in the sound/It’s the one good thing that I’ve got,” he sings during the opening refrain. And then, during the verses: “To win the race, a prettier face/Brand new clothes and a big fat place/On your rock and roll TV.” (This is switched to “the boys on MTV” during the second verse) “But today the way I play the game is not the same, no way/Think I’m gonna get me some happy.”

Having a model lip-sync these lyrics is, at face value, an interesting artistic ploy – how much more ironic can you get, having someone valued almost exclusively for their outward appearance sing about the woes of image branding? Depending on one’s level of cynicism, the decision can be thought of either as a reaffirmation or as a critique of using attractive women’s bodies to sell music. (Recall how Michael previously objectified Kathy Jeung’s body in the “I Want Your Sex” video.)

But the five women who appear in “Freedom! ‘90” are not nameless props but five of the biggest celebrities of their day. The true unknowns in the video are, in fact, several male models, all bearing passing resemblance to Michael (if you squint), who pop up intermittently to offer more subdued versions of what the women are doing. Their expressiveness is not in their faces but in their bodies: peeling an orange, swaying upside down from a pull-up bar, flicking a lamp on and off while tossing and turning on the ground. Such a proliferation of faces and bodies performing Michael’s
art for him not only grafts his identity upon them, but also splinters it. Outlining this audiovisual technique within “Freedom! ‘90,” José Cláudio Siqueira Castanheira writes:

Lip-sync becomes an element of fascination, not just by shifting the function of the singer from protagonist of a short story, but, likewise, by pulverizing this character into multiple personas. The character/singer is replaced by a succession of possible bodies: bodies that are objectified and depersonalized…The constant use of close shots, highlighting the face and the articulation of the lyrics by the models, which act as if in an advertising campaign, not only confirms the attraction of lip sync but also evokes the hypnotic power of those perfect visages framed by diffused light and other scenographic elements. Any nostalgic remembrance of that video works, without fail, by evoking these feelings, regardless perhaps of the very existence of the male character that appears at the beginning as a ‘counterpoint’ to the women’s determining presence.34

The models, even the ones with considerable autonomy in the public eye, are reduced to hypnotic objects of worship, adoration, and stardom when in front of the camera.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in “Freedom! ’90,” literal objects that previously appeared in the “Fame” video – Michael’s leather jacket, his guitar, the jukebox – systematically catch on fire and explode during each rousing chorus of “Freedooom!” The video suggests that, in the fact that they exist within the work to inform Michael’s star image, the models are no different from the literal “Fame” objects.

During the instrumental break, there’s a blinking round of flash-cuts, each shot dissolving in and out in the blink of an eye, and the brief flashes we get suggest that two of the models, Christy and Linda, are enacting a sort of blood bond together – selling their souls to fame? Binding together as one and the same entity? Soon after, during the song’s bridge, Michael’s sing-over laments being noticed only for

“[shaking] your ass,” and we cut to a close-up of a male model’s ass in boxer briefs, his hand absent-mindedly scratching. Then, cutting back to Christy’s eyes in the shadows, the mood suddenly turns vindictive: “Some mistakes were built to laaaaast…that’s what you get!” Michael snarls. He repeats the phrase over and over, each time with new intonations of bitterness and seething anger and filtered through a different model’s persona. Naomi shrugs the words off; Tatjana makes them melancholic (seen again when she muses, “And after all this time…”); Cindy twists them into a seduction; and Christy delivers them with a conversation-ending finesse.

The original message of the song is like puddy in the video’s hands, bent and stretched into a multitude of inconclusive meanings. Right then, George Michael’s ambivalence towards the medium is, in a way, justified: his original intention is lost to the whims of the video director, to the fractured portrayal by women (and men) who look and act nothing like he does.

But what makes “Freedom! ‘90” groundbreaking is that Michael aimed for it to be a work of transformation, a passionate statement that he was not bound to any one identity, any one reputation as an artist or any one theme that the public could project onto his music. Unlike Bowie, who avoided occupying a single identity by keeping his outward presentation in perpetual flux, Michael rejected the notion of exterior presence defining his identity altogether. He was not the clothing he wore nor the objects he carried; he could be whomever he desired onscreen. By having the five models portray him in the video, he not only emphasizes the many facets of himself as a human being – the five women are their own complex characters as well, each displaying a full range of emotions and brandishing the song’s lyrics as their own
weapon. Paired with Fincher’s directorial style, which injects pathos into every shot, “Freedom! ‘90” breaks the very mold of the star image itself, and what level of control a pop auteur like Michael was expected to have on their videos. Michael Jackson’s projects had to be about his dancing; Prince forced his directors to go read magazines in the corner; Kate Bush stood in front of a camera and made her physical motions the central (and sometimes only) focus. George Michael took a different approach: he told Fincher exactly how he wanted to be seen, and then stood back and let Fincher paint the portrait.

![Figure 3.3: Christy Turlington (left) and Linda Evangelista (right) in the video for “Freedom! ’90” (1990).](image)

Fincher, it turns out, was not the only director to reshape and experiment with video persona during this era. In early 1990, “Vogue” was nominated for MTV’s Video of the Year award but lost to Sinéad O’Connor’s “Nothing Compares 2 U” (dir. John Maybury), a dramatically stark video that confronted viewers with such extreme rawness that they had never had to interrogate before within the medium. The following year, “Freedom! ‘90” wasn’t even nominated in that category; the 1991 winner was R.E.M.’s “Losing My Religion,” another video that explored questioning identity, but through a filter of loneliness. Nevertheless the messages of “Vogue” and “Freedom! ‘90” – a celebration of outward expression and a critique of
it, respectively – carried particular resonance with pop music fans, especially those in the LGBTQ community. “We just grabbed onto songs and artists who knew who and what we were, whether it was Madonna with ‘Vogue’ and Truth or Dare or George Michael with ‘Freedom!’” said Candis Cayne, a former NYC drag personality, in a New York Times retrospective on the “Freedom” video. “I don’t know if [George Michael] was openly gay or not, then. I guess not. But it was almost O.K. because we all knew and it was such a homophobic time…But going to a club, listening to ‘Freedom!,’ it was an escape.”\(^{35}\)

In the same retrospective, fashion designer Zac Posen linked the video’s aesthetics to future genres: “[W]hat I remember about ‘Freedom!’ was that it was kind of a seminal predecessor to grunge. Because you have these incredibly glamorous beauties in a very industrial, Corinne Day, London-type space…It was really the glamour of the ‘80s transitioning into something more raw that was to come.”\(^{36}\)

Granted, “Freedom! ‘90” is no grunge video. But along with “Vogue,” it signalled the end to a purely “star portrait” era of music videos. Pop videos, especially by pop starlets, were still aiming to show their central figures in the best light possible, but now they had to get more creative. What’s more, with the emergence of new music scenes in the public consciousness, like grunge and gangster rap, not all pop videos had to be objectively beautiful – they could be gritty, ominous, even downright terrifying or disturbing. All of this helped point the way to more directorial freedom and experimentation in the coming decade.


\(^{36}\) Ibid.

Figure 4.0: Spike Jonze (in character as Richard Coufey) accepting the award for Best Choreography for “Praise You” at the 1999 MTV Video Music Awards.
Chapter 4:
Mark Romanek and the Birth of the ‘90s Music Video

Recently, the comedian Casey James Salengo tweeted an observational joke on video stylings:

80’s music videos: let’s just rock and party!
90’s music videos: what if Jesus got eaten by dogs?37

He isn’t wrong. Music videos in the 1990s underwent rapid stylistic transformation thanks, in part, to the works of auteur directors like Mark Romanek and Spike Jonze. This was emblematic of a larger shift to further recognize directors for their work on MTV: in December 1992, the channel began listening directors’ names in the lower-left chyron credits at the start and end of each video. This was an admirable decision, to give credit where credit is due, as is generally agreed upon in most creative industries. But some music critics and historians prefer to look back on this milestone as the end of a Golden Age, rather than the beginning of a new one.

“Most of the people who created the video industry agree that by ’92, the Golden Age was winding down,” writes critic Rob Tannenbaum in his oral history I Want My MTV. “Videos were now carefully controlled by record labels, minimizing the chance of imaginative work. Large budgets substituted for fresh ideas. The arrival of digital editing, in the form of Avid, made it easy for directors to flit breathlessly between images…Novice directors increasingly saw videos as a way to showcase their own talents, rather than the band; music video had become an internship for

Hollywood employment… Videos had been ads for a song, or a band, or a way of living and dressing. Now that their names were credited at the beginning and end of each video, directors were also making ads for an additional product: themselves.”

Based on the video evolution during the 1980s and 1990s that I’ve researched, I find this line of thinking to be ahistorical and, frankly, a little absurd. It’s one thing to acknowledge a sea change—structurally, financially, socially—in a creative industry, with all its positive advancements as well as what ends up being sacrificed. It’s another to dismiss the new era entirely, all because the creative authority changed hands. Much of the same could be said about United States v. Paramount (1949), the death of the classic movie studio system, and the ushering-in of a new generation of directors (known as New Hollywood) who took more inspiration from European art cinema than classical film techniques, and whose movies are considered in hindsight to embody a more director-oriented era of Hollywood filmmaking. The shift in the music video industry carries interesting parallels to this shift in cinema: in the 1990s, video directors did gain more freedom for creativity and experimentation, as well as more general recognition. Avid viewers of MTV learned to pick out the running narrative themes and style components of certain directors once they had watched enough of their work; one could pick out a Hype Williams video, a Romanek video, a Gondry video, etc. In 2003, Palm Pictures released a Directors Label series of DVD compilations, each one highlighting the work of a different ‘90s auteur.

But in the midst of the decade, a ballooning music industry meant increased video budgets, which in turn meant that the record labels, as well as MTV, had final say on what could or would receive airtime. Still, although standards and decency

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38 Marks and Tannenbaum, 512-513.
remained a concern just as they had been in the 1980s\textsuperscript{39}, social norms had evolved, and MTV was willing to cut corners around censorship (e.g. letting the Beastie Boys’ “Sabotage” air, but trimming out the scene where there’s a knife fight) as long as their target audience was glued to their living room screens. Thus – and this becomes all the more apparent while watching these videos – the record companies were also willing to take more risks if it meant capturing the attention of Gen-X youth. In spite of the cash flow – video budgets regularly went to six or seven figures – many projects took on a more DIY or experimental aesthetic that was representative of the era. Stage lights, ruffled dress shirts, and classic Hollywood were out; skateboard videos, punk shows, and genre movies were in. If pop videos weren’t shot on-location, they were filmed on industrial soundstages, with metallic piping and shimmering, flat lighting effects. A number of ‘80s videos had a homespun aesthetic, too, but it was more grounded in the worlds of theater and art school. ‘90s videos, on the other hand, came out of the home video generation – directors who, as teenagers, amassed their favorite movies on VHS, gravitated towards genres like sci-fi and horror, and had the equipment to make their own amateur films. The music videos of the day reflected their origins.

And if anything, the newfound recognition of a director’s creative input only made the collaborations between directors and artists more fruitful: every musician at the time wanted to work with Spike Jonze or Mark Romanek, both due to their pioneering videography and to their reputations for being highly collaborative,

\textsuperscript{39} The most significant censorship debacle in the ‘80s was the Vatican’s protest of Madonna’s “Like a Prayer” (1989). The video combined Catholic imagery with themes of murder, sexuality, and racial prejudice, including a scene of the Ku Klux Klan’s cross-burning. It didn’t help that Madonna had just signed a $5 million deal with Pepsi and featured the song in their advertisements.
thoughtful filmmakers with the utmost respect for their subjects. The care that David Fincher took to realize Madonna’s and George Michael’s respective visions in “Vogue” and “Freedom! ’90,” while also infusing each video with his own personal touch, was apparent in all of the decade’s top filmmakers. To say that the music video industry apparatus of the 1990s “minimize[ed] the chance of imaginative work” is to ignore the videos of the 1990s entirely. To reduce the credit finally given to directors to little more than advertising their names is both to ignore their innovations in the form and, in somewhat bad faith, to spin their creative vision into purely capitalist intent. Besides, it’s not as if the pop star suddenly didn’t matter. Whether or not Mark Romanek directed the latest Michael Jackson video was irrelevant – people were still going to watch Michael Jackson for Michael Jackson, just as they’d watch their favorite indie band for their favorite indie band. All that changed was how musicians and record companies sought out particular directors to work with.

It is true that during this era of video editing, advances in computers and digital editing software allowed for faster, more precise cuts. Like all new artistic innovations, this technique could be abused. “Directors started putting as many cuts as they could into five seconds, but none of the cuts meant anything,” the renowned ‘80s director David Mallet told Tannenbaum. “Music videos were the first genre to encompass nonlinear editing. That’s when they started to go bang bang bang bang bang. It got hugely abused.”^40 Granted, it’s not as though Mallet didn’t use nonlinear editing himself: “Ashes to Ashes” and his other videos with David Bowie tend to not have a traditional beginning, middle, and end, jumping around freely to different

^40 Marks and Tannenbaum, 512.
locations and set pieces. But his average shot length (around 8 seconds) was
inarguably longer than what would become the norm during the ‘90s.

But the editing style had to adapt to the evolving sound of ‘90s pop. The
bouncing, reverberated drum beats and echoing, wobbling synthesizers of the
previous decade gave way to much sharper, more churning production styles with
electronic buzzes and sirens. Compare the sound and look of something like
Madonna’s video for “Burning Up” (1983, dir. Steve Barron) with that of her video
for “Ray of Light” (1998, dir. Jonas Åkerlund): one aural sensation in one era
materialized as her writhing in a parking lot, the other her zooming at light speed
across the world’s highways. However, this rapid editing style primarily came in
handy as a tool for whenever a director wanted to ratchet up the force of the song in
question, highlighting its speed, rhythm, drumbeats, vocal interjections, and other
characteristics with precise cuts. It’s no coincidence that film style evolved similarly
throughout the mid- to late 1990s and into the new millennium; action movies such as
1998’s Armageddon, 2002’s The Bourne Identity, and 2004’s The Bourne Supremacy
liberally cut their footage to imbue it with intensity, some shots and sequences
zooming past the human eye. Were these films drawing from music videos, or did
did their editing styles transform independently? Certain details, like shot length during a
particular Bourne sequence set to music, suggest a direct connection: “Bourne’s
average shot length of 2 seconds nests within the music’s tempo of roughly 120 beats
per minute (one shot per measure),” writes Carol Vernallis. “The characters’ sharply
etched movements, the camera’s rapid change of focus among them, and the jagged
editing can bring forward musical materials—a beat, a beginning of a musical hook.
The electronic dance music’s constant pulse means any beat, and any offbeat as well, can be brought to the fore.”\footnote{Vernallis, \textit{Unruly Media}, 37-38.} Also consider Baz Luhrmann’s 2001 jukebox musical film \textit{Moulin Rouge!} – indebted to prior musical films, of course, but undeniably like a longform music video in its breakneck pace and histrionic tone.

Another important transition in music video during the ‘90s, and in pop music writ large, was the birth and rise of grunge music. Suddenly the dominant popular music was no longer sugary club hits or overwrought ballads, but dark, sneering, distorted guitar-heavy tunes that mimicked modified Beatles riffs for pure misanthropy. And, generally speaking, the videos to come out of this genre were unlike anything seen before in pop music – these are where the record companies and MTV were willing to take (some) risks. Who could forget the demonic pep rally of Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit” (1991, dir. Samuel Bayer), with its low-budget yellow smog and cheerleaders of anarchy? Or Soundgarden’s “Black Hole Sun” (1994, dir. Howard Greenhalgh), riffing on suburbia with its demented housewives and spray-tanned husbands getting sucked into an apocalyptic hellhole in the sky? This was as far from the teen romance of “Take On Me” as you can get.

The grunge videos also, unsurprisingly, butted heads with the censors more than once, sometimes to the point of generating controversy for all involved. The most infamous example of this was Pearl Jam’s 1992 video for “Jeremy” (dir. Mark Pellington). Eddie Vedder, the band’s lead vocalist and lyricist, wrote the song after reading a newspaper article on Jeremy Wade Delle, a 16-year-old boy from Texas who shot himself in front of his teacher and his second period English class one
morning in 1991. The video, edited by Bruce Ashley, uses rapid-fire cuts and a “collage” effect of sound, still images, and textual elements, juxtaposed with live-action sequences, to paint a portrait of Jeremy’s life leading up to the suicide. The narrative elements range from the ordinary to the abstract to the political: we see Jeremy being bullied by classmates, running through a forest, screaming at his parents at a dinner table tableau, and wrapping himself up in an American flag surrounded by fire, all while Biblical verses and chalk-drawn words such as “peer” and “problem” flash onscreen. Much of the video is shrouded in expressionistic lighting, with sharp blues, reds, and purples enforcing an “Afterschool Special from hell” aesthetic, as Entertainment Weekly described the video at the time. Vedder inserts himself into the video as well, looking both enraged and demonically delighted as he sing-screams the lyrics.

“Jeremy” comes to a head in the final sequence, the shooting. In the original video cut, the boy strolls into the classroom, tosses an apple to his teacher, takes out a gun, points the barrel in his mouth, and pulls the trigger. The next shot is a frozen tableau of his classmates, their clothes splattered in his blood and their faces recoiling in horror. It’s a shocking, grotesque sequence, but MTV’s restrictions at the time only called for one censorship-related edit: “Jeremy” could not show the actual gun onscreen. In the final video cut, the shot where Jeremy takes out the gun is cropped at his torso; we never see the gun, but we can see he’s reaching back to take

42 According to Vedder, the song was also influenced by a kid he personally knew in high school, with whom he had altercations and who, as Vedder put it in a 1991 radio interview, “shot up an oceanography room” once.  
44 This is the same reason why Spike Jonze’s classic video for the Beastie Boys’ “Sabotage” has no guns in it, even though it’s a parody of 1970s cop shows. The “cops” in the video had to use knives instead.
something out of his pocket. The shot where Jeremy puts the gun in his mouth is now
done in extreme close-up, only depicting his eyes as they shut in concentration. After
that, the video cuts to the same shot as it did in the unedited version: the other
students, splattered in pinpricks of blood, the camera panning over the entire
classroom to get a full scope of the damage. Thus, due to their rigid censorship
guidelines, MTV ironically made the problem worse by implying that Jeremy shot *his*
classmates instead of himself.

*Figure 4.3: before (left) and after (right) edits were made to the shooting scene in*
*Pearl Jam’s “Jeremy” (1992). Notice how the edited version emphasizes Jeremy*
*reaching into his back pocket, but cannot show the gun onscreen. The tableau of*
*Jeremy’s classmates (bottom) was left unchanged in both versions.*
There was a predictable uproar from watchdog groups, and although the video was well received and garnered four VMAs, including Best Video of the Year, Pearl Jam were so frustrated with the controversy overshadowing their music that they refused to make another video for years. The “Jeremy” video was said to have motivated a school shooting in 1996\textsuperscript{45} and, following the Columbine High School massacre in 1999, it was rarely shown on MTV or VH1, censored or uncensored, ever again.

Into this environment rose Mark Romanek, who really did embody the “what if Jesus got eaten by dogs” ethos of ‘90s music video directing. Not all of Romanek’s works are as grotesque or sacrilegious as that description implies, but they do all match that level of passion and intensity. “He really is about doing videos that support the artist, and finding the soul of the artist and the soul of the song,” said legendary music producer Rick Rubin when interviewed on Romanek. “And amplifying [those souls], taking them to an extreme that the song itself or the artist themselves rarely could reach.”\textsuperscript{46} Working with close, longtime collaborators such as cinematographer Harris Savides and editor Robert Duffy, Romanek is one of those directors who “produce images that exist in so graceful a relation to the music that their visual lines become part of the music”; as a director, he becomes a “session musician,” working closely with a band or artist to realize a shared vision.\textsuperscript{47} It is that rare combination of perfectionism and pure drive that makes Romanek’s videos so compelling, and is the reason why Romanek has worked with some of the most


\textsuperscript{47} Vernallis, 113.
influential and popular musicians of all time, both throughout the 1990s and into the aughts and 2010s. But his style is undeniably shaped by the decade his career truly got off the ground; the ‘90s, with all their directorial-focused experimentation, allowed for his auteurist style to flourish.

Figure 4.4: a still from the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ Mark Romanek-directed video for “Can’t Stop” (2003, left) and a photo from Erwin Wurm’s One Minute Sculptures series (right).

In a chapter defining the aesthetic and stylistic signatures of directors like Michel Gondry and Spike Jonze, Vernallis attempts to define the style of Mark Romanek:

The work is handsome and meticulously rendered, and even when the director tries to transcend his own style…everything feels set in place. The power of Romanek’s videos is opaque, especially because his personal voice seems nearly invisible under an ironclad technique. Details revealed in the DVD’s documentary suggest that sheer labor contributes to the realization of his style. A glimpse into the background of spaces reveals elaborate preparatory sketches and models…The shoot for Jay-Z’s “99 Problems” consumed twelve days,
produced twelve hours of footage, required four editors, and drew on the industry’s best.\textsuperscript{48}

What we get from this is that Mark Romanek is uncompromising. (In his own words: “Some people don’t want to compromise, and those are the people that I enjoy collaborating with.”\textsuperscript{49}) He’s uncompromising in his work ethic, to a degree that can be both immensely frustrating for and exceedingly caring to his collaborators, who more often than not are as equally perfectionistic as he is.\textsuperscript{50} But, more admirably, he is uncompromising in whatever purpose he’s set out to make a video for, even if the resulting vision dives into something more overtly intellectual or risqué than the average MTV fare. Romanek is not shy about his highbrow cinematic and artistic influences; he frequently cites Orson Welles, Stanley Kubrick, and Roman Polanski as his favorite directors. One of his earliest breakthroughs, 1993’s “Jump They Say,” for David Bowie, features visual homages to French New Wave/sci-fi films such as Alphaville and La Jetée; Welles’ The Trial (1962), adapted from the Franz Kafka novel; and Jacques Tati’s absurdist satire Playtime. Romanek described his own iconic video for Nine Inch Nails’ “Closer” (1994) as a “Jungian dream,” and appropriated one of its most memorable (and censored) images – a nude woman balancing two spinning eggs on her fingertips – from a painting by Rudolf Hausner. Even his 2003 “Can’t Stop” video, for the Red Hot Chili Peppers, whom Romanek fondly described as “knuckleheads,” was inspired by the fine arts photographer Erwin Wurm’s One Minute Sculptures. Perhaps due to this cerebral bent in his work,

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid, 264.
\textsuperscript{50} A shortlist: David Bowie, Madonna, Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson, Jay-Z, Beyoncé, Trent Reznor, Beck, Michael Stipe, Bono, Taylor Swift, Justin Timberlake, Mick Jagger, Fiona Apple.
Romanek became an award show darling, not just at the populist MTV Video Music Awards but also at the Grammys, where he has won the singular Best Music Video award three times, the most wins by any one director. Two of these wins were for collaborations with Janet Jackson: “Scream” (1995), with her brother Michael, and “Got ‘til It’s Gone” (1997), which featured the rapper Q-Tip and a prominent sample of Joni Mitchell’s “Big Yellow Taxi.”

“Scream,” which portrays the Jackson siblings on a tricked-out, black-and-white spaceship, was an important forbearer for eccentric, sci-fi-infused video work in the early 2000s by other black musicians, such as Missy Elliott and TLC. The lyrics, centered on resistance towards press attention and the refusal of being packaged as artists, suggest that in the video, the Jacksons literally resorted to leaving Earth in order to be their truest selves, specifically their truest selves as black people. “Something I always loved about this video as a kid is that it does feel super politically black, in a way,” remarked culture critic Jenna Wortham, on the New York Times podcast Still Processing. “But they’re also refusing ideas of what blackness is. They’re looking at Jackson Pollack [paintings]. There’s Andy Warhol imagery.”
There’s *Akira*, images from anime and *Akira*. These works of fine art manifest as holograms that the Jacksons can flip through with a remote control; an enraged close-up of Kaneda, the protagonist from *Akira*, appears behind Michael on a video screen in about a dozen shots. Other scenes show the Jackson siblings playing squash together; at one point, Michael sits cross-legged in a Japanese-style meditation room, at peace, but soon can’t help but scream up at the heavens. CGI glass comes shattering down on him. But the most thrilling moment comes during the song’s break, when Michael and Jackson dance in synchronicity. Romanek keeps the camera on the pair as they match each other’s every move. It’s as though, after watching them vent out their frustrations across this sci-fi wonderland, we finally get to see the Jacksons at their most liberated.

![Figure 4.6: a still from Janet Jackson’s “Got ‘til It’s Gone” (1997).](image)

For “Got ‘til It’s Gone,” Romanek was inspired by *Drum* magazine, a publication that in its heyday was essentially South Africa’s version of *Life* magazine. “The photography was stunning. [I thought that] I would like to make a video that depicted black culture that wasn’t so obsessed – as a lot of the hip-hop videos were in

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that period and still are – with materialism and sexism. I just felt like, ‘There’s gotta be other aspects of black culture to depict.’”\textsuperscript{52} It’s both easy and justifiable for some skepticism to be leveled at Romanek, a white director, for deciding which aspects of black culture are worthy of depiction. But Jackson also professed an interest in \textit{Drum} and other signifiers of black intellectualism for the video, and specifically chose Romanek to direct after working with him on “Scream.” The video tenderly depicts Jackson as a lounge singer in a sprawling, cavernous bar, where a vibrant dance party is taking place. The swelling, prosperous mood and blend of 1960s and 1970s African fashion suggest a liberation from and opposition to apartheid; the video ends with bottles being thrown at Afrikaan segregation signs. Years later, \textit{Complex} magazine would refer to the blend of styles in the video as “like a moving Tumblr.”\textsuperscript{53} Vernallis called it “overwhelmingly warm,” and noted how the visuals drew attention to the similarities between Janet Jackson’s voice and that of Joni Mitchell, whose music is sampled in “Got ‘til It’s Gone” and whose archival concert footage appears on TV screens in the background.\textsuperscript{54} Even Mitchell thought that the video was a step forward: “I found this video to be full of humanity. Janet herself was lovely. But it had dignity, and it was full of life.” Adding to Mitchell’s comment, Jackson said pointedly, “Mark’s work is \textit{always} like that.”\textsuperscript{55}

Granted, just because Romanek expressed sensitivity in his work didn’t mean it was always considered wholesome. Three of the scenes in “Scream” ran afoul of the MTV censors: Janet giving the middle finger, Janet simulating urination while

\textsuperscript{52} “The Work of Director Mark Romanek.”
\textsuperscript{54} Vernallis, 267.
\textsuperscript{55} “The Work of Director Mark Romanek.”
standing up, and a very pronounced “stop fucking with me” during the second chorus. Romanek’s 1997 video for Fiona Apple’s “Criminal” drew controversy for putting its 20-year-old star in highly sexualized scenarios, all of which she gave consent to at the time but which later made her feel coerced. “The song was really about feeling bad for getting something so easily, and taking advantage of your sexuality and using it to get whatever you want,” Apple stated in a 2005 interview. “Which ended up working with the video, because it was a sexual video and I got exactly what I had wanted, but then I didn’t feel good. I actually did feel like a criminal after that.”\(^5^6\) (Unfortunately and unsurprisingly, Apple was the target of the video’s most vile criticism.)

![Figure 4.7: stills from Nine Inch Nails’ “Closer” (1994).](image)

And it’d be difficult to forget Nine Inch Nails’ “Closer,” with its images of nudity, rotting meat, BDSM, crucified monkeys, beating hearts, and spinning pig’s heads shot on a vintage, hand-cranked film camera. It infamously resembled a kind of sadomasochistic snuff film, with set pieces taken from gothic horror and “mad scientist lab” B-movies but not grounded in any particular era – a sepia-tinted nightmare land outside of time. In addition to Rudolf Hausner paintings, its influences included the haunting works of Joel-Peter Witkin, Francis Bacon, and George Tooker,

\(^{5^6}\) Ibid.
as well as a 1987 stop-motion film, *Street of Crocodiles*, by the Brothers Quay. In other words, it was the sort of video that MTV would usually stamp with a big fat “nope.” Either that or, as it had with “Jeremy,” the TV station would censor it beyond recognition or original meaning.

Luckily, whether by chance or by intervention on Romanek’s part, the necessary censorship was done in accordance with the video’s style. Cut scenes, like the nude woman or Reznor hanging by handcuffs from the ceiling, were replaced with “Scene Missing” title cards, mocked up to look like old film stock. Early masking techniques edited out certain offensive material while allowing whole scenes to remain (i.e. erasing a plastic miniature crucifix on a nude model’s blindfold). “They wanted the hand of their censorship to be invisible,” says Romanek – perhaps they had learned their lesson from the “Jeremy” debacle.\(^\text{57}\) Thanks to these techniques, and to Romanek simply being good at infusing the entire video with his and Reznor’s desired tone, the essence of “Closer” was preserved beyond censorship.

Romanek’s magnum opus is his 2003 video for Johnny Cash’s “Hurt,” a cover of a Nine Inch Nails song. Most people, when they think of “Hurt,” immediately think of the Cash version, in part because the video, which won Romanek his third Grammy, makes the song, the legend of Johnny Cash, and Cash’s actual life story inextricably linked. Romanek cuts together scenes of a feeble, weary Cash inside his home – playing guitar or piano, or seated in a throne-like chair in front of a feast, all by himself. His only living companion is his wife June Carter, who in one shot gazes down at him over a stair bannister, her hair long and gray. These clips were initially going to make up the entire video, but as Romanek and his editor were conducting

\(^{57}\) Ibid.
research at the House of Cash museum, they came across the archives of Cash’s film
work, commercials, live performances, and other visual media. On a whim,
Romanek’s editor, Robert Duffy, dropped an archival clip of a young, vibrant Cash
riding a train into the video’s rough cut. Romanek was so moved by the juxtaposition
that he had Duffy splice in bits of the archives throughout “Hurt.” They also included
still shots of the House of Cash’s dusty and decrepit interiors, with giant framed
portraits of Cash stacked haphazardly amongst books and cracked record displays.

![Figure 4.8: stills from Johnny Cash’s “Hurt” (2003).](image)

As a result, “Hurt” is the most existential music video ever made: it directly confronts
the faded images and fragile objects that imbue stardom, that build a legacy, and that
outlast an artist’s own life, all as a dying Cash pours wine over a rotting banquet and
warbles, ruefully, “You could have it all/My empire of dirt.” It starkly weaponizes
emotional intensity in a way that had never been done in the medium before: there
was no nudity, no violence or gore, no obscenity. There were, very briefly, shots of
Jesus carrying the cross in his “crown of thorns” – a lyric in Cash’s version of the
song, changed from “crown of shit” in the Reznor version. But no one could accuse
Johnny Cash of being sacrilegious; if anything, his devout faith only made the
iconography more radical than the heretic decorations in prior videos. “Hurt” was so
intense that those close to Cash found it almost offensively difficult to watch. Rick
Rubin, who produced “Hurt,” thought the video was beautiful, “but it was so unlike any video I’d seen before, and so extreme, that it really took my breath away, and not in a good way. I didn’t know how to handle it. It was just overwhelming.”

Mark Romanek had a steady music video career into the new millennium, directing videos for Linkin Park, Jay-Z, and Coldplay, until 2005, when he turned his attention away to his feature film career (One Hour Photo, Never Let Me Go). He wouldn’t return to music videos until 2013, when he filmed a Marina Abramović-style performance of Jay-Z’s “Picasso Baby,” at New York’s Pace Gallery, in which the hip-hop mogul rapped the song to individual guests. Since then Romanek has directed another Jay-Z video, “The Story of O.J.”; the “Sandcastles” sequence in Beyoncé’s Lemonade; Taylor Swift’s “Shake It Off”; and two videos each for U2 and Justin Timberlake. In all of these videos, something feels missing from the classic Romanek formula. “The Story of O.J.” is a successful, biting critique on race in America, told in the style of Warner Brothers’ infamous “Censored Eleven” cartoons, but in choosing to tell it in animation rather than live-action, Romanek deferred his usual amount of creative control over to a team of storyboard artists and animators. “Sandcastles” is one portion of a larger work, and its visual style was heavily influenced not only by Beyoncé herself but also by Reed Morano, its cinematographer. Romanek’s videos for U2, Timberlake, and Swift, while very polished and occasionally conceptual (Timberlake’s Steve Jobs android in “Filthy”), are devoid of that same magnetic intensity, that boiled-down essence of the song’s

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58 Ibid.
59 A group of eleven Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies cartoons, produced between 1931 and 1944, known for their blatantly offensive stereotypes of racial minorities, particularly black Americans. United Artists, which owned the distribution rights to these cartoons, withdrew them from syndication in 1968 due to their content being deemed too insensitive.
themes, present in Romanek’s earlier videos. The visuals he uses don’t seem like the heightened version of the song nor of the artist, but rather interchangeable effects and scenarios that half-heartedly grab your attention for three or four minutes. The U2 videos, “Invisible” and “The Miracle (Of Joey Ramone),” are especially phoned-in: they depict the band performing onstage in black-and-white and in a glitchy rainbow effect, respectively, with no other narrative or stylistic details. “Shake It Off” did manage to generate controversy, but not an intended one: its use of black women as twerking backup dancers, framing the very white Taylor Swift, was deemed “ill-timed” when released close to the Ferguson, Missouri protests. In defending the video, Romanek stated, “If you look at it carefully, it’s a massively inclusive piece, it’s very, very innocently and positively intentioned. And – let’s remember – it’s a satirical piece. It’s playing with a whole range of music video tropes and clichés and stereotypes.”

60 Watching the video, it feels more like Romanek doing his best impression of Dave Meyers, a director known for portraying music video tropes in their goofiest iterations without challenge.

Still, one can’t view Romanek’s transformation as entirely independent. The music video industry has shifted quite a bit since the ‘90s, establishing itself on the internet and prioritizing user feedback more than directorial artistry. Music videos are still meant to get people talking, but in a harmless, positive way, one that will encourage social media shares and effusive responses from fans. Even in the medium’s short yet mutable history, the ‘90s were an unusually poignant time for

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experimentation and pushing the envelope on what was acceptable in the form; it’s hard to imagine a director like, say, Chris Cunningham working with a mainstream pop artist in 2018. Yes, the creative energy was arguably based more in the offscreen directors than in the stars themselves, but the stars were still the main draw for MTV, and a director’s success depended on how well they could collaborate with the artists whose songs they were bringing to life. What’s most exciting about this era to me is that, although several of the most prominent directors went on to have successful film careers, much of the breakthroughs they made in music video were unique to the form and could not be replicated in longform narrative film. As we’ll explore in later chapters, these directors – Dave Meyers, Hype Williams, Michel Gondry, Spike Jonze – understood the limitations and possibilities of the form to an unprecedented degree.

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61 Cunningham, primarily known as a video artist, directed Björk’s cyborgian “All Is Full of Love” (1999), as well as two videos for Aphex Twin: the terrifying “Come to Daddy” (1997; voted Pitchfork’s #1 Video of the 1990s) and “Windowlicker” (1999). The latter video is a grotesque, fascinating subversion of the sexually charged R&B videos made by Hype Williams and others in the ‘90s.
Chapter 5:
Pop Overblown, with Dave Meyers and Hype Williams

The two most successful music video directors in history, by sheer ubiquity and career longevity, are Dave Meyers and Hype Williams. I say this because, unlike Spike Jonze or Michel Gondry or David Fincher, Meyers and Williams have succeeded and continue to succeed on the basis of their music videos, without much in the way of other enterprises, moviemaking or otherwise. (The one notable exception, for Meyers, was his 2004 series of commercials for iPod, one of the most successful ad campaigns of all time.) It’s hard to talk about them solely as ‘90s video directors because their work has remained just as relevant in the 2000s and 2010s. The sheer volume of their video output alone is daunting. But both of them got their start in the 1990s, and the videos they produced during the decade – and the many long-standing creative partnerships that resulted – laid the foundation for mainstream pop videos in the aughts and beyond.

Dave Meyers is a visceral, gaudy director. He is raucous in a way that fully embraces the pop culture mainstream while at the same time oversimplifying the tropes and trends from that world. Flattened characters – both literally and figuratively – may creep into his videos, although lately he has grown more sophisticated in his depictions. He’s not one to depict his subjects as relatable or human, and unsurprisingly he’s never worked with someone like Adele. (His collaboration with the intimate, love-weary R&B artist SZA is an unlikely pairing,

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62 Both have directed well over 100. Meyers directed over 40 in a single year.
but we’ll get to that in a bit.) Meyers’ sensibilities best suit the work of pop idols like Britney Spears, rowdy jokers like P!nk, campy weirdos like Missy Elliott. Outside of pop and party-centered hip-hop, he’s directed videos for post-grunge, Top 40 rockers like Creed and Nickelback; his 1999 video for Creed’s “What If” alternatively shows the band rocking out in a warehouse and wandering through a forest of hedges, backlit by blindingly white stage lighting. In a movie this would read as a Close Encounters of the Third Kind scenario, but Meyers is just emphasizing pop’s falseness. (The video’s horror climax leans much closer to Scream’s satire.) This isn’t a regrettable quality, considering the artists he’s working with. Meyers showcases musicians as idols and sticks to pop video conventions while having fun; genre conventions are respected, but played around with, sometimes honored and sometimes satirized.

![Figure 5.1: Missy Elliott in “Get Ur Freak On” (2001).](image)

When filming his stars, Meyers utilizes a technique Vernallis refers to as “hyperbolic frontality” – “the stars appear to be blown up 15 percent larger than life.”\(^{63}\) He may do this by framing the subject in close-up as “large heads,” but even

\(^{63}\) Vernallis, 248.
in medium shots, Meyers manages to achieve this effect by lighting the subject in such a way that they stick out from the background. Other characteristics include a slightly tilted camera in certain shots – a way of making the video seem more staged rather than less so – and the creation of artificial sets, particularly in his earlier work. Note the soundstage in the Creed video, or the computer-generated, fantasy version of Hollywood/Beverly Hills in Britney Spears’ “Lucky” from 2000. Along with CGI, Meyers constructs these settings with brash, lurid colors: “hot pink, magenta, lime green, light turquoise-blue.”64 Heightened textures also contrast with one another – glossy surfaces with earthier ones, or the wooden with the metallic. His set designs can get so crowded that they begin to resemble a Disneyland ride’s showroom: Missy Elliott’s “Get Ur Freak On” (2001) bursts with green vines and hidden temple bric-a-brac, inexplicably rubbing up against cascading waterfalls and bank vault doors. The lighting is extreme, not in the Fincher-esque, subsumed-by-shadow extreme, but rather so blown-out in white as to make the image look especially two-dimensional and fake. Unlike comparable pop videos in the ‘80s, which made their artificiality known through rich purples and expressionist set designs – all quirky angles and shapes – Meyers’ aesthetic feels factory-like, industrial.

Even the orbiting bodies in the videos resemble objects off an assembly line; background dancers may act as miniature versions of the central star, or as clones of each other. Either way, they flank the blown-up central character like a tiny army. Take, for instance, the masculine, leather-jacket eye-candy ensemble in P!nk’s “Most Girls” (2000). P!nk stands like a giant in the foreground, her fuscia-colored hair popping out from the black, blue, and silver hues in the rest of the frame. Behind her

64 Ibid, 248-249.
are the identically dressed men, receding into the pipes and metal grates that surround them. Every shot in the video emphasizes the fact that it’s shot in a massive cage, with P!nk being the only one allowed to break through the fourth wall – with her eyes, her hair, the way she’s composed in the frame. The one other exception appears during the video’s intro: a muscled, black hunk playing the cello, shirtless. Little moments like this one occur in nearly all of Meyers’ videos, something to tease the viewer’s society expectations without ever really challenging them, and without much narrative connection. Meyers doesn’t hide the fact that the worlds he’s creating are artificial, or that it’s easy to spot the patterns among them. He delivers the product like an iPhone, uniform and seamless, a customary package of pop bliss.

![Figure 5.2: P!nk’s “Most Girls” (2000).](image)

While other directors may shoot for narrative continuity in their editing style, Meyers prefers to highlight individual musical elements by syncing them up to compositions, movements, and post-production effects. In OutKast’s “B.O.B.” (2000), Meyers liberally uses rapid zoom-in and zoom-out effects added in post, as well as chroma key, masking, and color correction to wildly mutate the palette of the video; the sky is unnaturally blue, the grass where one half of the rap duo, André 3000, and the schoolchildren run on is inexplicably violet, and when the video cuts
back to a disconnected close-up of Andréné, he randomly turns the same shade of purple. The scenery ranges from “realistic, but with mutant colors” to “100% CGI generated and fantastical” (i.e. one of the party buses owned by Big Boi, OutKast’s other half, or his throne room). It captures the frenzied, breakneck pace of the song, along with its pertinent lyrical mix of Y2K anxiety and “party like it’s 1999” fervor. At one point the video zooms out to reveal that it’s all taking place inside the giant silver “O” in the “BOB” logo. An image such as this one would usually be a closing shot, but instead Meyers dives right back into the mayhem.

The videos more grounded in reality (e.g. Jay-Z’s “Do It Again” from 1999) still take advantage of a party atmosphere to emphasize the song’s mood, all while using flashy yet simple effects like freeze frames, match cuts, or a rapid series of fade-to-black cuts that sync up to a drum line. Vernallis writes of this attention to specific musical moments:

One way Meyers keeps the viewer within the always-unfolding present is through his attention to a song’s rhythm. Meyers encourages his performers to move demonstratively, more broadly than characters in other directors’ videos. The ways that these figures throw their arms above their heads and perform knee bends, one wants to award them pickaxes. They really pump it.65

Like all pop video directors who gravitate towards dance-oriented works, Meyers aims to match the physicality of the stars onscreen to the music playing underneath them. Depending on a song’s mood or tempo, a director may slow down an image of a dancer so that it better matches the music’s pace. Sometimes videos are shot almost entirely in slow-mo for this reason, as was the case with Mark Romanek’s “Got ‘til It’s Gone.” But just as often, Meyers speeds the image up, not only for those

65 Ibid, 251.
individual sonic moments, but also to achieve a uniform style or narrative tone across an entire video. For example, in P!nk’s “Get The Party Started” (2001), P!nk mimes picking up the phone as she sings “I’m your operator, you can call anytime,” and later, throws her hip out and points to her butt at the line, “They’ll be kissing my ass.” Both of these motions are sped-up on film. This is so that P!nk’s actions can properly sync up to the lines being delivered, but they’re also done this way to meet the breakneck narrative pace of the video. P!nk is speedily getting dressed to go out dancing at the club, so through the sped-up footage, Meyers brings us to her same hurried state of being.

![Image](image1.png)

*Figure 5.3: OutKast’s “B.O.B.” (2000).*

“Almost all of Meyers’s stars are at some point made to look foolish, vulnerable, or too full of themselves,” writes Vernallis. For frequent Meyers

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collaborators like P!nk and Missy Elliott, this suits their trademark, self-deprecating senses of humor. P!nk sets her hair on fire in “So What,” portrays herself as a dolt in “Stupid Girls,” and gleefully acts out a contemporary Annie Wilkes role in “Please Don’t Leave Me.” Missy Elliott plays Dance Dance Revolution in “Ching-A-Ling” and buries herself in the sand in “Lose Control.” Occasionally, Meyers’ goofy sense of humor has been in poor taste. In “B.O.B.,” “OutKast’s members frolic among stereotypical images of blackness—gospel singers in purple robes, blaxploitation’s dancing heroines, even orangutans and chimpanzees.” P!nk’s 2006 video for “Stupid Girls,” which was made to lampoon Britney Spears-esque tabloid stars, takes a negative outlook towards all instances of overt female sexuality. There’s even a bulimia joke. (To contrast its skimpy, “dumb blonde” girls, the video portrays soccer players and politicians as the ideal female role models.) And all this is to say nothing of the goofy jingoism in his 2000 video for Kid Rock’s “American Bad Ass.”

However, as visible in his post-YouTube work, Meyers’ politics have evolved with the times, just has pop music has matured to an extent. The stereotypes have receded into a more subdued goofiness, moments like in his “Drew Barrymore” video, for SZA, in which a twenty-foot-tall giant walks across the screen for no apparent reason. In “WTF (Where They From),” one of his latest Missy videos, she and her collaborator Pharrell appear as charming puppets. Meyers may have done away with his raunchier humor, but it’s refreshing that he managed to preserve this spontaneity. Choices like this with no narrative rhyme or reason wouldn’t pass in a feature-length movie, but in a video, as long as an element contributes to the mood of the song, Meyers is game for anything. The videos he made during the first half of his

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67 Ibid, 258.
career (1995-2005) are, in nearly every category, the opposite of “cinematic,” but
that’s exactly what’s made them so influential within their medium.

Meyers’ closest stylistic contemporary is Hype Williams. Like Meyers,
Williams is a pop, R&B, and hip-hop director who focuses on “momentary pleasures”
within a song more so than its large-scale narrative. (Fincher and Romanek would fall
into the latter category.) He is also one of the industry’s most highly prolific directors,
releasing around 200 videos in the span of two decades. He, too, uses techniques in
cinematography and post-production to enhancing the iconographic qualities of his
work. His stars appear 15 percent larger than they are in real life; his videos are
horizontally oriented and dance-centric; the sets are textured, industrial, betraying
their artificiality while fitting the song’s mood in an oversimplified way. His lighting
design at once rounds the faces of his characters and two-dimensionally flattens them
with its intensity. His earlier, low-budget videos leaned more heavily on realism,
especially given how he got his start filming for gangster rappers. Wu-Tang Clan’s
“Can It Be All So Simple,” released in 1994, was a major career breakthrough for
both the rap super group and the director, capturing the rain-soaked, lamp-lit New
York streets at night with a neo-noir sensibility. Williams meticulously pans over the
back alley landscape with slow-motion crane shots, evoking a steady momentum to
fit the song’s easy-going pace and reflection on mafioso living.

But Hype – he is often referred to by first name only – is equally interested in
convexity and concavity, and as his career has progressed he has gone through phases
of experimentation to curve, reshape, and divide the rectangular or square music
video frame. His most notorious period was his use of fisheye and wide-angle lenses
throughout the late ‘90s and early 2000s. Missy Elliott’s “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)” (1997) is my favorite example and one of his most critically acclaimed videos to date. It features the eccentric rapper and a group of background characters in a variety of colorful, sun-kissed scenarios: dancing on a bright pink-and-yellow stage in orange overalls, driving to the beach in a Jeep, and plenty of stunting for the camera.

In one scene, Elliott is dressed up in what looks like an inflatable trash bag, along with latex gloves, goggles and dark lipstick, bobbing around in front of a curved fisheye lens. More characters, sans trash bags, make stilted motions in front of the same fisheye camera. For a mainstream pop video, the whole effect is extremely weird, made even weirder by the performers’ robotic dancing and hyper-focused gazes. Yet this was the video that launched Missy Elliott’s prolific video career, working frequently with Hype, Meyers, and other directors of their sort. When his experimentation was met with praise, it encouraged Hype to test out visual oddities in his otherwise industry-standard videos.

Another, albeit less successful, experiment occurred in 2005-2006, when he would compose entire videos in a three-bar split screen; one moving image, shot in widescreen, would occupy the middle row of the frame, while a second image, shot in
the square academy ratio, was underlaid beneath, poking out above and below the main image. Videos like Ne-Yo’s “So Sick” and Beyoncé’s “Check On It” applied this effect as something of a mood or scenery enhancer. As Ne-Yo pines over a lost lover, helicopter shots of snowy mountain peaks breeze past in the background. As Beyoncé dances and sings inside a hot-pink paradise, matching satin curtains flap above and below the frame. While these videos look tacky now, at the time they made aesthetical sense: with the creation of YouTube in 2005, the internet emerged as a place where one could watch music videos, even if it was not yet the dominant method of consumption. Perhaps Hype anticipated the layering images-upon-images and crowded webpages that would become ubiquitous to YouTube’s web design, and all too familiar to extremely online people. It stood in sharp relief to the singular focus of television.

![Figure 5.5: Ne-Yo’s “So Sick” (2005, left) and Beyoncé’s “Check On It” (2005, right).](image)

It’s also worth mentioning that Hype’s videos during this time included plenty of T&A. Just as Meyers has been accused of perpetuating regressive humor in his projects, including racial stereotypes and the objectification of women, Hype essentially codified the highly sexualized female backup dancer in hip-hop videos. He was far from the only offender, but his influence proliferated throughout the industry
ever since. Still, Hype’s collaborations with women artists can’t be boiled down to submissive objectification – his videos with Missy certainly aren’t, and neither are his videos with Beyoncé. Apart from “Can’t It Be All So Simple” and “The Rain,” his arguably most famous video during the ‘90s was for TLC’s “No Scrubs,” from 1999, which features the R&B trio dancing around a giant spaceship, undoubtedly inspired by the “Scream” video.

![Figure 5.6: TLC’s “No Scrubs” (1999).](image)

The three singers Chilli, T-Boz, and Left Eye are outfitted in varying degrees of Afrofuturist, cyborgian costumes and makeup. They’re surrounded by advanced equipment and machinery: Chilli poses on a giant mechanical swing during her solo verses, and during the rap break, Left Eye dons a blue robotic costume and shadowboxes in front of a giant floating camera, in a room shaped like an inside-out globe. (Here, we again see Hype’s interest in convex and concave surfaces.) T-Boz climbs up the walls of the spaceship and dances alone in a minimalist room of white circles, where we get several close-ups of her evocative, alien eye shadow. This may
all sound like superfluous, accessorizing details to a standard dance video, but Hype conveys each woman’s personality through these individualized moments to themselves. It helps that the song “No Scrubs” is an empowerment anthem, a meaning that carries through in the stars’ expressions. Instead of objectifying their bodies – which really would undermine the entire point – the camera captures their synchronized dancing in sweeping wide shots, emphasizing their power as a collective group of women as well as their strength as individuals.

Since the ‘90s, both directors have matured considerably without losing their signature trademarks entirely. Starting in 2010, with P!nk’s twin singles “Raise Your Glass” and “F**kin’ Perfect,” Meyers began using more sophisticated camera technology and lighting. By the time he directed Missy Elliott and Pharrell Williams’ “WTF (Where They From)” in 2013, he had all but abandoned the two-dimensional look of his earlier videos, instead emphasizing three-dimensional space, shooting on-location more often, and adopting the trendy, neon-coated Blade Runner aesthetic that has dominated music videos in the 2010s. There are certainly moments of horizontal tableau and direct address to the camera in “WTF (Where They From),” but they’re mixed with playful, well-composed shots of Missy Elliott and Pharrell in marionette form, goofing around on a city block. The shift in Meyers’ style has led critics to refer to his videos with that nebulous term “cinematic,” not really referencing a use of cinematic narrative language but rather their increased professionalism, advanced cinematography, and superficial resemblance to cinema.
And it’s true – they do look more like short films than capital-m Music Videos from the MTV Era. But that’s not to say Meyers has abandoned his sense of humor or obsession with momentary pleasure in his works. His video for Kendrick Lamar’s “HUMBLE.,” which we’ll explore in further detail in a chapter on Lamar, is a cornucopia of technological tricks and gimmicks; Meyers uses the video as a sandbox for his own visual experimentations and jokes, all while staying cohesive enough to remain true to Lamar’s vision. The 2017 video for R&B singer SZA’s “Drew Barrymore,” one of Meyers’ most subdued videos ever, still uses unusually fast cuts for a slow, melancholic ballad. And though it’s shot largely on location in New York, looking almost like a home video of SZA and her friends, Meyers manages to insert staged video moments and tricks. Besides the shot with the giant, there’s an exaggerated walk across the street a la Abbey Road; hazy glitch effects; a “pizza
a heart-shaped pinhole of light that SZA’s eyes move in and out of, not unlike the Christy Turlington lighting effect in “Freedom! ‘90”; and even a cameo from Drew Barrymore herself. It’s classic Meyers with a brand-new sheen.

Meanwhile, Hype’s video output has decreased since 2009. Oddly, he’s credited as the screenwriter, but not the director, of the muddled Kanye West short film *Runaway* (2010). (Director credit goes solely to West.) Hype’s recent videos, while sporadic, still carry traces of innovation. The video for Beyoncé’s “Drunk in Love” (2013) formed a portion of her self-titled visual album; the glamorous black-and-white portrait of the singer and her husband Jay-Z on a dark beach was a considerable departure from Hype’s earlier work.

![Figure 5.8: Beyoncé in “Drunk in Love” (2013).](image)

It’s sexual and sensual yet, as with “No Scrubs,” it depicts its female lead as a larger-than-life figure, at once an enigma not of this world and an aspirational goal. In one slow-motion clip, Beyoncé holds a trophy above her head – the kind you’d expect to be handed out a middle school basketball championship – before twisting her arm downwards, as if to slam the object into the sand. Hype cuts away before we see the motion through to completion; we never know what happens when the trophy hits the ground.
And we don’t need to. Hype Williams, like Dave Meyers, knows that video can tell a story without sticking to the strict linear narrative that (the majority of) feature films require. If narrative film chooses to tell a story out of order, such as with a flashback, it must make the delineations in time clear to the audience, and there must be a logical and thematic reason for its nonlinearity. Music video may not always be able to achieve that same narrative complexity, but on the upside, it has the freedom to use other forms of storytelling, ones that aren’t grounded in dialogue or fixed places and time periods. Instead they’re grounded in singular emotions, faint memories, brief serendipitous moments at parties or flashes of intense feeling towards someone else. These are all aspects of universal human experience that are explored in film but rarely brought to life in such specific pinpoints. Pop music, especially, is meant to achieve that same sort of ubiquity, those playful, disconnected moments of euphoria that Hype and Meyers help bring to life.
Chapter 6:  
The Cyclical Works of Michel Gondry

Michel Gondry loves circles. With a background in both drumming and animation, it seems inevitable that the French filmmaker was drawn to the particular visual medium of music videos, where rhythmic repetition could be made optic and storytelling could have a more casual relationship with realism than in narrative live-action film. As critics have discussed at length since the mid-1990s, Gondry has a particular obsession with cyclical time, a characteristic that happens to be exemplified in the repetitive verse-chorus structure and hooks of pop songs. His videos for Daft Punk’s “Around the World,” the Chemical Brothers’ “Star Guitar,” and Kylie Minogue’s “Come Into My World” all feature visual elements that correspond to different musical elements of their respective songs – “Around the World” through colorfully-costumed dancers; “Star Guitar” through buildings, telephone wires, and other set pieces that fly by the window of a moving train; and “Come Into My World” through clones of Minogue herself and the people around her. Each musical line (a drum beat, a keyboard hook, a synthesizer shimmer) has a unique visual match that either reappears onscreen or cycles through choreography in time with the musical line’s repetition; together, the individual elements “create threads that subsequently work in counterpoint.”

After creating stop-motion videos for the French rock band Oui Oui, in which he also served as a drummer, Gondry developed a collaborative relationship with Björk, a musician whose main conceit is a dreamlike subversion of typical pop.

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68 Vernallis, 97.
1993’s “Human Behaviour” depicts Björk wandering through a fairy tale forest, home to animated stuffed bears, hedgehogs with button eyes, giant hunters in flannel (or is Björk just in miniature?), and spontaneous trips to the moon.

![Figure 6.1: Björk’s “Hyperballad” (1996).](image)

Not all of Gondry and Björk’s collaborations contain worlds as richly developed as this one, but their motifs belong to the same universe inside their heads: model airplanes, menacing dentists in gorilla suits, pixelated clouds, a board of LED lights flashing across a sleeping Björk’s face. In that last example – from the 1996 video “Hyperballad” – Björk oscillates between a flesh-and-blood being and a floating, phantasmal hologram, running through an 8-bit city and grafted onto a digital canyon of pylon cliffs. The effect is as ethereal as the aurora borealis, as perfect a depiction of dreaming as ever put to film.

It was in 1997’s “Around the World” where Gondry’s obsession with dreams expanded beyond the aesthetic realm, and began to take shape as a common structural theme of the videos themselves. Sleep, as we know, occurs in cycles, punctuated by
deep REM sleep that is often categorized by both rigidly steady breathing and vivid dreams. Pop songs, too, can be both rigidly cyclical and vividly creative: a repetitive verse-chorus-verse-chorus structure with highly melodic hooks that worm their way into the listener’s memory, causing them to involuntarily play back lyrics of the song in their head at random moments. “Around the World,” by the French electronic duo Daft Punk, is an even more elemental song than usual – the entire track is made of hooks, produced by several electronic instruments and a robotic voice chanting “around the world, around the WOOO-OORLD.” Small breaks or variants in the song’s repetition, such as a bass guitar solo and brief respites from the keyboard, do enough to keep the song from becoming too monotonous, but “Around the World” is basically one long sonic circle.

Thus, Gondry decides to present it this way visually: a musical soundstage lit by discotheque reds and blues; two quartets of elaborately costumed dancers trotting up and down two sets of stairs; another four dancers in matching outfits doing high-kicks on another platform, in the center. (The entire design is supposed to vaguely resemble a vinyl record player.) About forty-five seconds in, yet another group of dancers, in
skeleton costumes, come in and start grooving to a squelchy guitar line. Finally, as
the “around the world” robot voice begins, a single-file line of robot appears and
marches around the stage.

Gondry keeps his shots in “Around the World” to around 10 seconds; he’ll cut
away or push a dolly over to dancers he wants to focus on at a given moment, keeping
their entire bodies within the frame so that the choreography is always visible. In this
way, it’s quickly discernable which group of dancers is meant to represent which
instrument: the tall athletes in gray tracksuits and prosthetic heads are the bass guitar,
ascending or descending the stairs in time with the notes; the high-femme “disco
girls” in swim caps represent the high-pitched keyboard; the kicking mummies on the
center platform are the drum machine; the skeletons mimic the guitar; and the robots
are, naturally, the robotic singing voice. The colorful dots on the soundstage’s back
wall also respond to the music; whenever the overall composition of the repeated
melodies shifts a little (e.g. a shaker is introduced, or one of the instruments goes into
a solo), the dots go from red to blue-green, or blinking purple to bright, shining
orange. Occasionally Gondry will pull all the way back from the stage, framing the
entire composition through a square window, as though looking into his (or your
own) mind as you hear the song. Aesthetically, the video isn’t all that different from
the elaborate, costumed, gaudy projects of the 1980s. But the structure is with much
greater purpose: it’s an early version of an audio visualizer, trying to capture all the
stimuli bouncing around in your head as you hear a repetitive piece of music.

In the Chemical Brother’s “Star Guitar” video, the aesthetics are plainer, but
Gondry’s recreation of a song’s cyclical form is no less impressive. The entire video
is filmed from the viewpoint of a passenger looking out a moving train. Along the way, different objects and landmarks – buildings, telephone poles, other trains – are repeated to match along to the song’s beats and rhythms.

Figure 6.3: stills from The Chemical Brothers’ “Star Guitar” (2002).

The merging of filmed landscapes and CGI objects in the video is astounding, even over fifteen years later, as is Gondry’s ability to pick up on subtle changes in the song’s repetition and variation like he did with “Around the World.” At moments where the song’s drum machine fades and it becomes quieter, the video will dramatically shift as well – the sky over a factory will turn to night, a subway car will obscure the view, the train will pass at a snail’s pace through a village street. There’s a satisfying moment in “Star Guitar” where, looking out the window in the village, we realize that the pedestrians passing by us are repeating, too, each one assigned to a word in the song’s repeated hook: “You should feel what I feel/You should take what I take.” Gondry takes the drab yet strangely mesmerizing activity of looking out a moving vehicle and turns it into something extraordinary.

It’s this comforting, childlike space between the familiar and the imagined, the explicit patterns and the inferred cycles, where Gondry’s most poignant work thrives. His video for Kylie Minogue’s “Come Into My World” starts off on a deceptively simple note. We see Minogue, in casual wear, exiting a Parisian dry
cleaners and walking through several busy crosswalks, all while lip-syncing to the song, which begins with a chorus and then its first verse. The camera follows Minogue in a long tracking shot; nothing about its movement suggests anything out of the ordinary. In the background, however, we see more chaotic, if not unheard of, events taking place: a woman tossing her ex-boyfriend’s belongings out her window, a man in a helmet accidentally knocking over two parked scooters, two movers carrying a precariously-placed box atop a table. On their own, each sight looks par for the course in a large city. All together, they merely read as odd.

![Figure 6.4: Kylie Minogue’s “Come Into My World” (2002).](image)

But it’s when the second chorus begins and Minogue ambles back around to the dry cleaners – she’s been walking in a circle, we realize – that things truly start to get weird. A second Kylie emerges from the dry cleaners, dropping a pastel pink envelope, just as she did at the start of the video. The first Kylie sees the envelope, picks it up, and frolics alongside the second Kylie as they loop back around the intersection, never acknowledging each other. (The second Kylie follows the exact same path and gestures as the first Kylie did on her first go-around, including lip-syncing to the first verse, while the first Kylie correctly lip-syncs to the second verse.)
and charts a slightly different course closer to the camera.) What’s more, the background characters of the video – the mattress-throwing woman, the motorist, the construction workers – have also doubled. Following the repetitive structure of the song, everything loops back around to the dry cleaners at the start of each chorus, producing a new Kylie and new background clones until there are, at the video’s fade-out conclusion, five versions of each. Though the multiple Kylies never interact, or seem to directly address anything besides the camera they’re singing to, the background only grows more chaotic as more characters crowd the image, some knocking things over and picking fights with one another, others working in harmony as they go about their business. “Come Into My World,” a monotonous refrain, turns into a cyclical soundtrack commenting on how the mundaneness of everyday life is marked with occasional peculiarities.69 Gondry uses dreamlike imagery and repetition to bring light to the mundane without the video itself becoming mundane.

These three videos most exemplify the theme of cycles in Gondry’s videos, although he would continue to explore the fundamental building blocks of music in his early aughts videos, and even in his feature films. Taking the elemental approach a step further, Gondry’s minute-and-fifty-five-second video for the White Stripes’ “Fell in Love with a Girl” simplifies its visuals of the band into actual building blocks. Scenes of the Lego-fied Jack and Meg White performing – rendered through recognizable wide shots and close-ups – are intercut with other action-oriented clips, such as the bandmates running up a staircase, riding bikes, or jumping into a pool.

Here and there Gondry splices in a few seconds of more abstract imagery: oscillating and exploding Lego brick colors, or miscellaneous traffic signals.

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 6.5: stills from the White Stripes’ “Fell in Love with a Girl” (2002).*

Additionally, there are variations in the bricks’ texture and three-dimensionality throughout the video. But from a viewing perspective, the real joy of “Fell in Love with a Girl” is in seeing an oft-used music video formula get stripped down to its absolute raw materials and still being able to recognize it for what it is. Most audiences will have seen enough videos that follow this storyline – a band performing their new hit single, interspliced with shots of them doing carefree activities – in order to discern what Gondry is trying to convey. And when they’re able to detect a close-up of Jack White in an image entirely comprised of Legos, there arises a feeling of satisfaction. Gondry does the most intelligent thing a filmmaker can do: make the audience feel intelligent.

Gondry’s critically beloved feature film, 2004’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, could not be mistaken for a music video. It has a traditional three-act structure, albeit told out-of-order by the enigmatic screenwriter Charlie Kaufman; it features memorable dialogue performed by well-known film actors; and, for all its experimentation, it fits neatly into the indie rom-com boom of the early 2000s. Yet the film’s fluid relationship to temporality, extensive crosscutting, dreamlike imagery,
and rhythmic inclusion of audiovisual motifs all point to staples of Gondry’s music video oeuvre. This isn’t to say that Gondry was the only one of his contemporaries to bring a uniquely audiovisual approach to his feature films; Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Punch-Drunk Love*, for instance, is heavily indebted to both his own early music video work and the work of classic Hollywood musicals. But very few movies contain more shared DNA with music videos than *Eternal Sunshine*.

In the tradition of classical filmmaking, Gondry’s style runs contrary to ideals of continuity and a streamlined approach to temporality. Sudden jumps in time, space, and perceived “reality” within classical film appear either as boxed-in scenes that directly support a narrative or character arc (i.e. flashbacks, dream sequences) or as pointed beats used to comment upon an overall theme (e.g. the bone-to-spaceship match cut in Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*). But their auxiliary function is much more visceral: an unexpected shift in audiovisual language – a variation on an established temporality – can provide momentary pleasure for the viewer. If properly executed, these changes can give us fresh sensory material to absorb without completely throw us for a loop (unless that’s the intended effect). This stylistic function, more so than a narrative one, is the purpose that is behind most music video cuts and, in a longform, moment-to-moment expansion, forms the basis of Gondry’s entire mode of filmmaking. As Vernallis writes:

*Eternal Sunshine* is structured as a lattice of sound-image connections. Although the film can be understood to take place largely inside one character’s head, its multiple points of view are not governed by a single, overarching perspective; often its separate strands do not even meet one another. This latticework allows for surprising connections, however, and thus for a strangely moving cinematic experience.\(^70\)

\(^70\) Vernallis, 95-96.
Eternal Sunshine’s narrative revolves around a man, Joel, undergoing a procedure to have his memories of a prior relationship erased. But the film actually starts the morning after Joel has had the procedure; he wakes up in a funk, decides to take the day (which happens to be Valentine’s Day) off from work, and goes out to the beach at Montauk. There, he meets a woman named Clementine who, unbeknownst to him, is the woman he had the relationship with and who has been erased from his memory. Clementine underwent the same procedure to erase Joel, so she doesn’t recognize him either, but the pair hit it off right away. From then on, using the memory device, Eternal Sunshine hops erratically through time and space, from the past to the present and back, moving forwards and backwards chronologically and often at the same time.

Figure 6.6: stills from Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004). As the character Joel loses more and more memories of Clementine, his other memories become more distorted, taking on hybrid qualities (i.e. riding a subway through a Barnes & Noble’s bookshelves).

Much of the film is told as Joel is lying unconscious in his apartment, strapped to machinery and undergoing the Lacuna memory erasure process. It hops between the present setting in the apartment, where the Lacuna technicians are trying to erase
his memories of Clementine, and Joel’s mind, where his relationship with Clementine is seen in reverse, as each memory is erased in backwards order. By the film’s midpoint, the basic structure, plot threads, and chronology of events becomes clear, but it is purposely ambiguous in the lead-up to the procedure, and Joel’s memory erasure process remains disorienting throughout the film. As Joel realizes, while in his own mind, that he doesn’t want to erase every memory of Clementine, he and the dream-Clementine run around trying to postpone the procedure. They take side-trips and detours into memories from his childhood, embarrassing ones from his adolescence, and so forth. Rather than these memories being traditional flashbacks, the lucid Joel – the one who’s aware that the Lacuna process is happening – gets thrown into these memories from his past. Sometimes he acts as his past self, sometimes as his present self. Meanwhile, as his memories deteriorate and are systematically erased, they blur, mesh together, and literally fall apart around him. Cars fall from the sky; faces are blurred-out or glitchy; bookshelves are erased piece-by-piece behind Joel and Clementine, as they keep running and remain literally one step ahead of the memory erasure. As Joel remembers a fond memory from his childhood, rain starts to fall in his and Clementine’s bedroom. Sometimes the voices from the Lacuna technicians intrude upon the memories, acting as transitional sound so that Gondry can cut back to the outside world and see what they’re up to while Joel’s asleep.

These prismatic effects together form the central device of the film. Like a music video, *Eternal Sunshine*’s highly extensive cross-cutting, along with its CGI-enhanced merging/blending of scenes, gives us a loose sense of narrative but mainly
brings out the film’s style and emotional resonance. Like Joel, we see the memories being erased right before our eyes, and translucency of the memories’ objects gives us the impression that everything could fade away at any moment. Motifs like Clementine’s ever-changing hair color provide some grounding in the film’s chronology, and also help the character stand out among the drab and/or fading locations. Gondry purposely shoots key moments of Joel and Clementine’s relationship in the winter: lying on a frozen lake; wrestling on a snowy Montauk beach; running through the rain. This helps the bright and colorful Clementine stand out but also gives all these scenes a sense of temporality, like Clementine and the world around her could disappear in an instant.

Repetition is also an important aspect of the film that ties it to Gondry’s music video work. Many scenes or memories are repeated or revisited multiple times: the trip to Montauk on Valentine’s Day, running haphazardly through a Barnes and Noble bookstore, Joel meeting with the head Lacuna doctor and having the procedure explained to him. Gondry returns to that last one about three or four times, and each time the scene grows more distorted. It goes from a “real world” scene, to a memory that is shot using only a single pinhole light pointed at Joel and the doctor’s faces, to a memory where both of their faces are completely distorted and featureless. Throughout the film we’re constantly returning to the Lacuna technicians in Joel’s apartment, as they struggle to complete the procedure and gradually have their own personal conflicts come out of the woodwork. Gondry presents the plot as these continuous cycles, and in fact, the basic building block of *Eternal Sunshine* is in its repetition: Joel enters a new memory, it plays out, and then it is erased. Sound and
dialogue follow similar motifs, as several phrases are repeated or mimicked back to other characters. Some of these are just a single word repeated multiple times in one line of dialogue, or a sing-song catchphrase: “slidey, slidey,” “Clemen-TEEN, the tangerine,” “two blue ruins,” “duck, ruck, ruck,” “Paaatrick, baaaaaby boy.” When Joel’s memory procedure first goes “off the map,” two Lacuna technicians repeat variations of “what should we DO?” to each other for about thirty seconds. Others are whole bits of dialogue that are repeated as Joel revisits a memory, or as Patrick, the Lacuna technician who falls in love with Clementine during her procedure, repeats phrases from Joel’s diary entries (and, thus, his voiceovers) as a way to win her affection. Each variation on repeated words and phrases adds new meaning, whether it’s a different enunciation, or spoken by a different character, or said in a different context, including whether it’s said in the present or in a memory. Just as Gondry managed to make every repetition in a pop song carry new thematic weight, he uses the stylistic structure of pop music videos to add thematic meaning to the film’s story.

And of course, sound is as important a device in Eternal Sunshine as it is in Gondry’s videos. The film “often interweaves diegetic sound overscored with nondiegetic music,” writes Vernallis, “as when the young Joel bangs out a four/four on a dead bird and an out-of-tune piano and strings fill in the accompaniment, thus making the boundary between music and sound more fluid.” Much of the film’s score, composed by Jon Brion (who also wrote the score for Punch-Drunk Love), is a

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71 Joel’s voiceover, too, comes and goes within the film. It’s there as an inner monologue during the opening Montauk sequence, but during the memory flashbacks it becomes indistinguishable from what present-Joel is saying as he revisits his memories. The voiceover isn’t meant to be Joel speaking from a future place in time, but rather is always the voice inside Joel’s head.

72 Vernallis, 106.
collage of heterogeneous musical stylings from different regions and time periods: Bollywood, jazz, Tom Waits, Bernard Hermann, punk, vaudeville, folk tunes, opera, Warner Bros. cartoon music, etc. Many of these are older genres, as though from one’s past or one’s childhood. String quartets and “a plunky guitar” may act as isolated musical cues, too; they’re often so short that it’d be daunting to chart out every musical track in the film, not to mention all the sound design overlaid on top. The dialogue in *Eternal Sunshine* is mostly spoken in close-miked voiceover; rewatching it again after several years, the characters’ voices reminded me of those on a podcast. This is another grounding technique used by Gondry – even as the audiovisual world of the movie is chaotically swirling, unpredictable, and omnivorous, the characters sound close, intimate, and tangible. Their voices are like a sliver of solid matter in a world of abstract, expressionistic thoughts and emotions.

At the end of the film, now knowing about their procedures but not remembering their prior relationship, Joel and Clementine decide to begin again, starting their relationship all over even though we, the viewers, know that it previously dissolved into incompatibility and heartbreak. Likewise, we never receive closure on what we learned about the Lacuna technicians and their own interpersonal drama. It’s as though everyone is just as heartbroken or lost as they were at the film’s beginning, or before they underwent the procedure. As *Eternal Sunshine*’s structure hews more to music video than to traditional narrative film, this sense of uncertainty feels more purposeful and more like an accomplishment than it would in a straightforward romantic comedy, because if the film’s entire structure has taught us anything, it’s that fractured uncertainty is what makes us human. “People [in *Eternal

73 Ibid.
Sunshine] are depicted as fragmented, patchwork constructions, but because people’s lives are made up of the same cultural materials they are at the same time interconnected,” writes Vernallis. “This hints at the possibility of solidarity, or even a kind of sympathy—a sense that people listening to one another can establish the coordination normally possible through collective musical activity.” Among the many fractures and prisms of Eternal Sunshine, there’s a commonality in the locations, sounds, words, objects, and experiences that its characters return to over and over again. It may take place in and surrounding Joel’s mind, but his memories involve all the characters in some way or another. If the film were told chronologically, or even in flashbacks that were more clearly delineated, we wouldn’t see the interconnectedness in these people’s lives and the meaning of the film would be lost.

A talented video director always demonstrates knowledge of how a pop song is structured, but Gondry stands out in his obsession with taking a song apart visually and showing the viewer exactly how it is constructed. In turn, he uses the rhythmic and cyclical structures of pop songs for his own ends in visual art and cinematic language. The only reason why Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind works as a narrative film is that Gondry was able to master this symbiotic relationship in his videos, and even putting his feature-length films aside, his work with Björk, Daft Punk and others demonstrates an exemplary grasp on audiovisual language. He managed to understand both how music videos are their own medium and how aspects of their style could be translated successfully to film, and for that, he is a one-of-kind auteur.

74 Vernallis, 113.
Chapter 7:
I’m Going to Praise “Praise You” Like We Should

If I had to choose a single music video director who not only dominated the MTV airwaves during the 1990s, but also defined that channel’s shift towards embracing videos that put innovation at the forefront, it would have to be Spike Jonze. In 1992, around the time that Jonze made his first breakthrough – “100%,” with Sonic Youth – MTV succumbed to pressure from the Music Video Production Association and began listing directors’ names in the bottom credits. Jonze’s rise to prominence throughout the early to mid-90s, along with directors like Mark Romanek and Michel Gondry, was cemented through MTV viewers’ recognition of him as a marquee director. But Jonze was far from the average auteur; he developed innovative techniques for sustaining viewer interest for the duration of his videos, and with his 1999 visual for Fatboy Slim’s “Praise You,” he inadvertently predicted the online viral video phenomenon and how music videos would function in the 21st century.

An avid skateboarder and BMX rider, Jonze (real name Adam Spiegel) moved to California from his hometown of Bethesda, Maryland, to pursue a career in sports photography. While doing ad photoshoots for the skate company World Industries, he was asked by company founder Steve Rocco to film promotional videos as well. In 1991, Jonze released Video Days, a skateboarding anthology that is widely regarded as the most influential of its genre. (It was Video Days that Mark Gonzalez, another skate company founder and a close friend of Jonze, presented to Kim Gordon at a Sonic Youth show, convincing the band to hire Jonze for a new music video.) Its
video template – presenting several skateboarders’ reels individually, but framed by ellipses showing the group going to the skate park together – has been recreated countless times, yet it stood out for its sense of humor; one prepubescent boarder skates around to the Jackson Five’s “I Want You Back,” at a time when most skateboarding reels were done to hardcore punk or speed metal. Video Days also established the two hallmarks of Jonze’s directorial style: 1) incorporating physicality, sometimes in its prowess and other times in its awkwardness; and 2) “sandbox aesthetics,” similar to Gondry’s, in that Jonze was more interested in producing high-concept videos on a shoestring budget than showing off the latest video technology. Unlike Gondry’s, however, Jonze’s videos tapped more explicitly into the ‘90s youth culture that would define much of MTV’s content for years to come. (In addition to his music videos and films, Jonze co-created the Jackass television series; co-founded the short-lived magazine Dirt, intended as a male counterpart to the popular teen girls’ magazine Sassy; and would eventually go on to help launch the millennial-driven channel Viceland.)

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75 From a 1999 New York magazine profile of Jonze: “To get permission to use the song...Jonze convinced his lawyers to tell the Jacksons' copyright administrator he was using it in an anti-drunk-driving film. To justify his claim, he then shot a sequence in which the team's mostly underage members swill booze as they hurtle down a dirt road in a giant blue Lincoln that eventually careens into a canyon.” (Ethan Smith, “Spike Jonze Unmasked,” New York, October 25, 1999, accessed April 14, 2018, http://nymag.com/nymetro/movies/features/1267/.)

76 There were exceptions to this – like Gondry, Jonze occasionally used cutting-edge digital technology such as CGI if he thought it best suited the video concept. But more often than not, Jonze used old-fashioned cinematic tricks that gave the illusion of something far more advanced. Patrick Wilson, the drummer for Weezer, notes on the Director’s Series DVD commentary that very little CGI was used in the “Buddy Holly” video – it was mostly clever editing – but at the time the media constantly compared it to the rotoscoping effects used in Forrest Gump. Much later, in his 2018 commercial for Apple HomePod, Jonze created the environment’s “stretched-out” effect by building a real mechanical set; hardly any CGI or digital effects were used.
Carol Vernallis writes in *Unruly Media*: “[Jonze’s] videos often begin with a single conceit: it might be a television sitcom trailer, or someone dressed up in a giant dog suit with a broken leg and a boombox walking around LA. These witty one-offs are charming. The mechanism is set to go, and then two-thirds into the piece there’s an interesting turn.” This “turn” that Jonze utilizes doesn’t have to be an earth-shattering one – it rarely is – but it keeps the viewer invested in whatever mechanism or gimmick Jonze has chosen to make the video about. Two of his most famous videos for Weezer, “Undone – The Sweater Song” and “Buddy Holly,” both exemplify this two-thirds rule. The conceit in “Undone – The Sweater Song” is simple: the band performs on a soundstage, with the song overlaid at normal speed but the band playing in slow motion. (This was achieved by Jonze filming the band as they played the song at 2x speed, then slowing down the footage.) At the 2:20 mark – about halfway through the video, but right as the band finishes a guitar solo and launches into the third chorus – dogs suddenly appear from the left side of the frame and run across the screen. At the end of the video, as the camera pulls back away from the soundstage, we see a few straggler dogs trotting around the set. Does the dogs’ arrival make any logical sense? No, but why should it? Jonze hasn’t established any narrative or conceptual constructs for the video beyond filming Weezer, on a plain soundstage, in slow motion – the entire purpose of which is to exaggerate the band’s movements and facial expressions. (Following Jonze’s ethos, it’s a cheap-looking video that nevertheless hooks you with its physicality.) Having dogs run across the screen not only fits the tone of the band’s performance – very goofy yet

77 For the record, the video she’s referencing, Daft Punk’s “Da Funk,” was filmed in the East Village.
78 Vernallis, 273.
exuberant – but also gives the viewer something else to pay attention to, just as the initial interest in the video begins to wear off.

In the music video for “Buddy Holly,” Jonze films Weezer as though they’re performing on *Happy Days*, complete with dapper outfits and an impressive recreation of the Arnold’s Drive-In set from the television show. To make the effect even more convincing, Jonze intersplices clips of the band performing with clips from the original show; he makes sure to match the video’s blocking and composition, along with proper shot-reverse-shot cuts, so that the clips of Weezer and the clips from *Happy Days* merge seamlessly together. Right before the song’s bridge, the video freeze-frames on Patrick Wilson playing the drums, and a “To Be Continued” overlay appears onscreen, as a studio audience recording “awwws” in protest. The video dissolves to a clip of a spinning record with the *Happy Days* logo overlaid, and an announcer saying, “Stay tuned for more *Happy Days*.” The clip then fades out, and fades back in to another freeze-frame of the band performing. The video resumes again. It’s a small detour, but it both enriches the world Jonze has built for “Buddy Holly” and draws the audience back in at a point in the video where they may be drifting away. Jonze is brilliant at making simple video treatments that will hold the viewer’s gaze, but he also understands each concept’s limitations; his introduction of new stimuli two-thirds into his videos breathes new life into them and holds the attention of even the most distracted viewers.

Likely from his skateboarding roots, Jonze is also obsessed with finding new, creative uses for drab locations, using the music to guide the ordinary into the extraordinary. His projects for the Beastie Boys, like “Sure Shot” and the highly-
regarded “Sabotage” video, have the quality of homemade genre movies being shot by a (very talented and resourceful) teenager, whether it’s filming the Boys guerilla-style at a Vegas casino, à la the Rat Pack, or acting out a ’70s cop show title sequence in East Hollywood. “Sure Shot” transforms its spaces through expressive close-ups, while “Sabotage” does so through action-oriented compositions and fast-paced cross-cutting. Although “Sabotage” is the far more elaborate of the two, “Sure Shot” is just as effective in its small, technical subversions of space, like when the Boys mug at a camera hooked to a playground swing. It’s a fun way to add extra movement to what is essentially a video of the Beastie Boys walking around parking lots and rapping to the camera, and the unconventionality of the camera placement – and how they interact with said camera – perfectly captures their goofball mannerisms.

Figure 7.1: Björk’s “It’s Oh So Quiet” (1995, top left), The Pharcyde’s “Drop” (1995, top right), Fatboy Slim’s “Weapon of Choice” (2001, bottom).

Many of Jonze’s videos carry a love for dance and movement not unlike a studio musical, but rather than recreating the theatrical sets of the genre, Jonze films his “mini-musicals” in unexpected locations. Björk’s “It’s Oh So Quiet” video is shot
like a hybrid Busby Berkeley/Jacques Demy musical, but – playing more to Demy’s ethos – is filmed on location in the working-class San Fernando Valley. In the DVD commentary, Björk describes Jonze as having a “slapstick” presence, which can be derived from the video’s composition and editing. During the song’s meandering, subdued verses, Björk walks alone through a tire shop and down the street, in slow motion. Then the choruses explode, rather comically, into ensemble musical numbers. “The chorus’s enormous big-band sounds produce streetside, explosive, giddy, collective activity, as well as overhead and crane shots.”79 Even concepts as simple as “a rap video in the streets, but done backwards” (The Pharcyde’s “Drop”) or “Christopher Walken dancing like Fred Astaire in a hotel lobby” (Fatboy Slim’s “Weapon of Choice”) help to transform the spaces that they’re set in, opening them up to new creative and practical possibilities. And nowhere is this more evident than Jonze’s most prescient music video, 1999’s “Praise You,” for Fatboy Slim.

In 2018, it’s hard to convey the impact and brilliance of “Praise You,” which now reads as a flash mob video. We currently live in a time of irony and sardonic humor, and nothing embodies pure hokeyness more than the dancing flash mob. It’s a frequent viral video subject, and if you’ve watched enough of them on YouTube, you’ll recognize a tried and true format: in the middle of a suburban mall or Washington Square Park, loud music inexplicably starts to play, as though non-diegetic. A small, unassuming group congregates and begins a synchronized dance like robots given a directive. As curious onlookers gather around and the mob grows in size they dance, with plastered smiles and Disney parade buoyancy, to the sorts of pop songs you’d expect to find at a bar mitzvah. The video ends with a grand finale

79 Ibid, 273-274.
and a transfixed, cheering audience, though at this point the mob has grown so large that it’s impossible to tell whether the clapping mall-goers were also planted.

The viral video flash mob peaked around 2010-2011, not long before it was featured on *Glee*, and it has long since been buried in the graveyard where online fads go to die. The “Praise You” video, released at the turn of the century, could easily be considered an early prototype, depicting Jonze himself leading a dance routine to “Praise You” in front of unsuspecting moviegoers at an LA theater entrance.

Curiously, although “Praise You” got extensive MTV airtime and took home three VMAs (Breakthrough Video, Best Direction, and Best Choreography), Jonze is not widely considered to have originated or precursed the now-ubiquitous flash mob. That honor would go to Bill Wasik, a former senior editor at *Harper’s* magazine and current deputy editor of *The New York Times Magazine*, who organized, via email, the first successful flash mob within the flagship Macy’s department store, in 2003. In this case there was no dancing, no plastered smiles nor wholesome entertainment; instead, over 130 people simultaneously gathered around an expensive rug on the ninth floor, telling befuddled sales assistants that they were “gatherers” living together in a “suburban commune” on the outskirts of New York, shopping for a “love rug” as a group. That summer Wasik planned similar instances of what we now, in 2018 slang, might call “mass trolling:” a crowd storming the Hyatt hotel lobby to clap in unison for 15 seconds; a large group of “bus tourists” infiltrating a SoHo boutique; several hundred bird imitators chirping together in Central Park.

The point of these acts wasn’t online infamy, or even to be captured on video; YouTube wouldn’t launch for another two years. But they were made possible
through the Web, as the emerging technology of email allowed for widespread communication between strangers on an unprecedented scale. That new system sparked the imagination of Wasik and others, who emailed out meeting places and instructions to masses of people in order to create physical “manifestation[s] of your ‘cc’ list,” as one early flash mob organizer in Britain described the phenomenon.  

The organizers’ exact motivations ranged from “just having fun” and a desire to prank unsuspecting bystanders – again, what we’d now call trolling – to more philosophical inclinations. Wasik in particular considered his flash mobs to be “social experiments;” in separate interviews, he interchangeably described flash mobs as “highlighting conformity,” “encouraging spontaneity,” poking fun at obsession over the “next big thing,” or demonstrating how “just getting out in the streets is a political act.”  

As disparate as all these themes are, their main throughline is Wasik’s insistence on the internet playing a role in the flash mob’s genesis. But when the novelty of online communication faded, so did the flash mob’s philosophical motives. As the Vancouver Sun shrewdly noted in 2008, Wasik’s intentions ultimately backfired: “In his attempt to criticize the hipster’s craving for the next big thing, Wasik may have created The Next Big Thing. If he wanted to strike a blow against conformity, he may instead have ended up giving conformity a vehicle that allowed it to appear nonconforming.”  

Certainly, by the time the term “flash mob” became

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81 Ibid.
associated with *Glee* dance numbers and corporate demonstrations (“The T-Mobile Liverpool Flash Mob Dance”\(^8^3\)), the whole trend had gone full-circle.

“Praise You” doesn’t fit the definition for “flash mob” in the original Wasik sense of the phrase; Jonze only used six dancers, and he auditioned each of them in-person rather than sending out a mass email to strangers telling them to meet at a time and a place. But in terms of online communication, the video’s origin story – starting out as a small joke and growing into a full-blown project – does carry whiffs of that propulsive, expanding force. “Praise You” began as a humble tape, sent to Norman Cook (aka Fatboy Slim) by Spike Jonze in 1998. Cook had asked Jonze to shoot a video for his song “The Rockafeller Skank,” but due to the shooting schedule for Jonze’s debut feature film, *Being John Malkovich*, he had been unable to commit. Instead, as a gesture of appreciation, Jonze sent Cook a videotape of himself dancing to “Skank” outside Grauman’s Chinese Theatre in Hollywood, in the same jeans, striped T-shirt, and glasses he would later wear in the “Praise You” video. Cook loved the tape so much that he begged his label, a division of Universal Music Group, to postpone the “Skank” video production so that Jonze could direct it. Upon seeing the tape, Universal refused. But they allowed Jonze to direct the video for Fatboy Slim’s next single, “Praise You,” on the condition that it would only cost $800 to produce. Jonze, alongside Roman Coppola, developed the concept of a fictional Torrance Community Dance Group (from Torrance, California), with himself cast as their leader and choreographer, Richard Coufey. He and a small group of dancers would rehearse a routine set to “Praise You” and perform it outside the Regency

Village Theatre in the Westwood neighborhood of Los Angeles. There would be no shooting permit, no planted bystanders, no professional film crew – Jonze would have a “camera crew” of five people, including Coppola, with handheld camcorders. They would shoot guerilla-style, and whatever unfolded in front of the Regency would get edited into the final cut.

“Praise You” contains all of Jonze’s hallmarks. With the opening title card, the video is immediately set up as a DIY effort, a “home video” created as a fictional Torrance Public Film Production. When we first open on the Regency, a crowd has already gathered, and our POV is from a camcorder held over someone’s shoulder. Jonze and the dance troupe are crouched and bent low to the ground. When the music starts, it’s dubbed over, non-diegetic, but we can see that there’s a boombox behind Jonze and we hear the ambient noise of the crowd as well as the echoing fuzz of “Praise You” coming through the speakers. Then Jonze and company rise up and begin their routine. The dancing itself is remarkably silly, buoyed by Jonze’s/Coufey’s over-the-top enthusiasm and commitment to the act. The song’s grand total of four repeated lines – “We’ve come a long long way together/Through the hard times and the good/I have to celebrate you, baby/I have to praise you like I
should” – underscore a theme of love and commitment, but Jonze’s choreography interprets it as literal worship. His and the other dancers’ ritualistic movements involve outstretched palms, lying prostrate on the ground, shaky convulsion-like movements, joyous leaps into the air, and – the most memorable dance move – something akin to a circle of fish swimming backwards. The other dancers appear less involved than Coufey, but rather than looking bored, they give the performance of a dutiful congregation to Jonze’s ecstatic preacher. Many of the video’s shots run long, around 20-30 seconds, each experienced from a slightly different POV angle amongst the crowd of onlookers. Jonze occasionally crosses over into interacting with the unsuspecting extras (e.g. jumping up and down next to one women, accidentally kicking the rope divider for a queue running into the theater). At one point, at what could be considered the two-thirds “interruption” of the video, a man in a white shirt – one of the real-life theater managers – walks over and turns off the boombox playing the music. Jonze/Coufey leaps up and hugs him like a little kid, before crouching down and turning the boombox back on, to cheers of encouragement from the crowd. In the director’s cut of the video, there’s a second interruption, where another theater employee walks outside and turns off the boombox himself. The crowd boos at him. After a short dispute with Jonze/Coufey (we can’t hear any of the dialogue, but we can assume Jonze is still in character), the manager leaves and Coufey once again turns the boombox back on, starting the routine over. The whole video feels as loose and celebratory as stumbling across a street performance by chance, where the quality of the dancing never eclipses the appeal of its enthusiasm. The entertainment, the thrill of the thing itself, is to feel lucky enough to have
materialized into this circle of strangers at this place and this time, to witness a devoted group of amateurs daring to praise a song, in public, for free, outside a venue that charges you to see a movie. Thank god someone filmed it.

Fatboy Slim’s label initially rejected the video, not in spite of its low budget but because it looked low budget. MTV, too, put its foot down. “[They said we were] just taking a piss, it’s rubbish, we’ve got to make another one,” recalls Cook, nearly twenty years after the fact, in an interview with London Real. “For the first month, MTV refused to play it. I think ‘substandard’ was how they described it.”

Ultimately, in a prophetic moment, the video’s distribution came down to what the audience was willing to click on. VH1 picked up the video, and in their weekly online “Viewer’s Choice” poll, “Praise You” won five weeks in a row. “I suppose it was the first sort of viral…something that was under the radar, and kids would go, ‘Have you seen that? Have you seen this video?’” says Cook. It was only then that MTV put the video in rotation, where it quickly became a crowd favorite and snatched up its four VMAs. The public, while enamored with the video, had to describe its concept in much different terms than we would today: in a profile of Jonze, New York magazine referred to it as “reimagining the amateurism of America’s Funniest Home Videos as Broadway spectacle.”

Nowadays, all music videos must cross the same threshold – not the record company gatekeepers, though they persist, but the court of public approval. It’s one thing to make a video that, when a twelve-year-old turns on MTV in the background as she’s crafting her latest zine on the living room floor, will cause her to look up and

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85 Smith, “Spike Jonze Unmasked.”
think “huh, that’s interesting” and watch it all the way through. But there’s no such thing as “background noise” on the internet, unless you count the myriad ads and sidebars and “suggested videos” and algorithmic programming all vying for our attention on the same webpage. This, however, is active noise, far from passive, not something you willingly turn on in the background as you’re folding clothes. It knows it’s fighting a zero sum game: you can have twenty internet browser tabs open, yet you can only really view one or two at a time. Unlike television programs, which still retain an appeal as background noise (i.e. streaming Netflix as you’re making dinner), short-form music videos have gone the way of most native digital media – they either have your full attention or none at all. What’s more, it is up to the viewer to determine not only where their eyeballs go – a Word document, Twitter, the latest viral flash mob video – but also whether or not they decide to share that content on their own social feeds, and thus bring more eyeballs to it. MTV never had to worry about the percentage of attention viewers had on any individual video, just as long as they still had the channel flipped on. But on the vast, partitioned internet, a music video’s success is determined solely by its shareability, how good it looks on a person’s digital wall, how quickly it can become the Next Big Thing.

Spike Jonze’s videos were always made to grasp your attention out of the corner of your eye and hold it for their duration. It’s impossible to determine how well they’d fare if Jonze made his first video in 2012 rather than 1992; for one thing, the appeal of his work relies so much on sustained kinetic energy that trying to pare the magic down into a still image, or even a gif, for wider online consumption would

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86 Movies arguably have the opposite problem – where once they had your full attention or none at all, depending whether or not you chose to go to the movie theater, they now can also serve as background noise. In your home, they function more like television.
be more trouble than it’s worth. His premises, while incredible to say out-loud – A

gymnast’s routine set to the Chemical Brothers! A dog-boy walking around to Daft

Punk! That guy from Dinosaur Jr. playing golf in the middle of Manhattan! – have to

be watched in full in order to truly appreciate the concept. “Praise You” is different,

in a sense. It became something of a minor phenomenon; when Jonze, in character as

Coufey, visited New York to perform at the 1999 VMAs, people in Times Square

stopped him on the street and mimicked the choreography. The original tape that the

video was based on, the one of Jonze dancing alone out in front of Grauman’s, was a

viral video in situ, meant only for Norman Cook’s eyeballs, and Cook only had to

watch it for three seconds to know that he had struck gold. How pertinent that, upon

seeing the tape, his first instinct was to share it with the world.

87 **Torrance Rises**, directed by Spike Jonze and Lance Bangs, 1999.
Part 3: “The Viewer,” 2006-present

Figure 8.0: a screenshot of an email exchange between Mark Romanek and David Fincher, posted on Romanek’s Instagram account (March 9, 2018).
Chapter 8:
How YouTube Revitalized the Music Video

When recalling how music videos became an online medium, one of the first videos you might remember is Lady Gaga and Beyoncé’s “Telephone” (2010), directed by Jonas Åkerlund. You might also think of Gaga and Beyoncé’s earlier collaboration, “Video Phone” (2009, dir. Hype Williams), or the memorable visual for Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance” (2009, dir. Francis Lawrence, who would go on to direct three out of four *Hunger Games* movies). All of these music videos were vibrant, over-the-top productions that at once invoked the sugar-sweet aesthetics of the ‘80s and the slightly more chaotic, more daring projects of the ‘90s. “Bad Romance,” especially, brings the horror of a Nine Inch Nails video to glossy, operatic heights.

But there’s something special about Åkerlund. You need only look at a picture of the Stockholm-born filmmaker to get an idea of how he made such a splash: he is almost always dressed in all-black, with matching shoulder-length hair and sunglasses, often accompanied by his wife Bea, a clothing designer for his videos and her own fashion line, who sports a more candy-coated but still very Burton-esque sense of fashion. As with his own personal appearance, Åkerlund is obsessed with overwrought style, costumes, and general mania in his videos. His first breakthroughs in the genre were The Prodigy’s “Smack My Bitch Up” (1997), an unsurprisingly controversial video that was filmed entirely in POV shots,88 and Madonna’s “Ray of

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88 And with a twist ending that reveals the protagonist – who goes out on a drug-fueled night on the town and sleeps with a prostitute – is actually a woman.
Light” (1998), which showed the glamorous icon twisting and writhing in front of sped-up images of city life. If David Mallet thought the bulk of ‘90s videos was too fast-paced, Åkerlund’s videos were coke-fueled benders by comparison, an aesthetic he likely acquired from his stint as a heavy metal drummer in his late teens. The fact that he would go on to direct both “Paparazzi” and “Telephone,” two of Lady Gaga’s most formative videos, feels like kismet.

But first, we need to understand what happened in the intervening years between “Ray of Light” and Åkerlund’s projects with Gaga. In the mid-aughts, the arrival of iTunes and mp3s had drastically shifted the music industry. No longer did record companies have the exorbitant budgets they had during the dot com boom. In a flash, MTV replaced nearly all its video content with scripted reality shows. As average video budgets plummeted from upwards of a million dollars to barely six figures, many directors, including Åkerlund, abandoned the medium altogether, leaving only the most successful and malleable videographers like Dave Meyers and Hype Williams to direct the few remaining marquee projects. (Fittingly, Meyers directed the iconic silhouette commercials for the iPod, the very piece of tech that was leaving the video industry in shambles.) Some directors, like Spike Jonze and Michel Gondry, managed to earn critics’ and audiences’ approval through their feature films, although these were rarely huge financial successes. Others, such as Samuel Bayer (“Smells Like Teen Spirit”), who directed the profitable but critically panned Nightmare on Elm Street reboot, could never completely escape the music video ghetto.
YouTube, founded in 2005, initially struck gold by providing the internet with bizarre, low-budget, amateur viral videos like “Star Wars Kid” and “Numa Numa.”\[^89\]

It wasn’t until the platform’s first viral music video, OK Go’s “Here It Goes Again” (2006, directed and choreographed by Trish Sie), that record executives began to see YouTube’s potential to revive the comatose medium. “Here It Goes Again” makes complete sense as a transitional artistic entity: with its lo-fi one-take format and playful premise of having the band members hop around on eight treadmills, it shares some common DNA with Jonze’s “Praise You” but with more pretense, occupying the same bizarro world of semi-improvisational performances that viral videos such as “Chocolate Rain” do. The pleasure in watching the OK Go video is that the band seems to acknowledge the fact that they’re moving about in a small screen inside of a larger screen; they move in and out of the static frame, the streaming horizontal lines of the treadmills running parallel to the time-lapse bar at the bottom of the video widget. Recall that “Praise You” worked as a spontaneous live event, one that was serendipitously captured – or made to look that way – and could be relived again and again as though you were a part of the crowd of unsuspecting onlookers.

Contrastingly, “Here It Goes Again” works because it’s a precise box; if the stationary camera were just a little off-center, you wouldn’t get the same effect. The beauty is in its lo-fi artificiality.

\[^89\] Initially these two videos had been uploaded elsewhere and become early internet memes (in 2003 and 2004, respectively), but the arrival of YouTube in 2005 made the original source material much easier to find. The common lore surrounding YouTube’s creation was that one of its founders, unable to acquire a clip of Janet Jackson’s infamous wardrobe malfunction at the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show, decided to create a platform where TV rips and other lo-fi footage could be easily accessed.
Of course, not every music video after that went in the same direction. Videos from indie or fringe artists aside, pulling off a lo-fi project while signed to a major label was and still is a relatively rare feat. For one thing, it arguably takes more creativity to develop a concept that can be filmed for a couple thousand dollars or less and still hook an audience of millions; there are only so many low-budget video ideas out there, excluding the ones that happen spontaneously in ordinary people’s home movies. And there was and remains an old-school mentality in the industry that all auxiliary products to a musician – the videos, the live events, the merchandise – have to have an upscale shine to them, no matter the cost. For many world-famous artists,
the gloss is considered an integral part of their brand; they have to market themselves as stars, after all.

So how were they all going to maintain that shine without going broke or proving stale? If an artist were successful enough, one way to go about it was the “have your cake and eat it too” approach. In 2008, Beyoncé released the lo-fi video for “Single Ladies,” another early viral hit, simultaneously with the video for “If I Were a Boy,” which was made on a much higher budget. (Both videos were directed by Jake Nava.) “Single Ladies” was itself based on a viral video: a clip of Bob Fosse’s wife Gwen Verdon and two other women performing a “Mexican Breakfast” dance routine on a 1969 episode of The Ed Sullivan Show. Beyoncé was inspired to adapt the choreography after watching the video on YouTube.90 Her version, while sophisticated in its black-and-white minimalism and modernized in its urban style of dance, still carried on the same format as the original “Mexican Breakfast” routine: the camera films Beyoncé and her two backup dancers on an unadorned soundstage. Besides the occasional cinematographic flourish (e.g. a few zoom-ins that sync up to the music’s zipping synth effects), as well as the iconic android arm that Beyoncé wears like a Jackson glove, it’s a remarkably straightforward visual. “If I Were a Boy,” meanwhile, is convoluted and dull, following a confusing plot of cross-dressing cops and cheating; while both the song and video were praised by critics at the time, it didn’t become the viral behemoth that “Single Ladies” did, and its overwrought narrative of infidelity pales in comparison to the lyricism that Beyoncé would later include on Lemonade. “Single Ladies,” on the other hand, inspired a dance craze that

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only expanded YouTube’s influence, with fans uploading thousands of choreography videos to the website. “I don’t think any of us predicted the amount of parodies it would attract,” Nava later said in an interview with MTV News. “It’s a testament to Beyoncé’s mind-boggling talent and to the fact that sometimes, less really can be more.”

![Figure 8.2: the original “Mexican Breakfast” routine (1969, left) and the version in “Single Ladies” (2008, right).](image)

But not everyone has the money to craft an online sensation out of a minimalist art piece; that low-budget look might work for OK Go or a group like the Beastie Boys, but not so much for marquee pop stars. In fact, if videos were going to survive the new millennium for much longer, they would have to generate a steady source of revenue. Instead of acting as pure promotional items themselves, or trying to become overnight memes, videos had to create their own ad dollars, as Logan Hill articulated in a 2010 piece for *New York* magazine:

> [O]ne thing that hasn’t changed between the MTV era and now is pop music’s taste for polish, style, and excess. What was needed was a technological leap forward, which came in the form of a broadband

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explosion and 3G. With those advances, sites like Vimeo, Vevo, MySpace, and YouTube were able to support high-definition video and advertising—a development that offers something MTV never could: Vevo, for example, gives a cut of advertising revenue to the artists.\footnote{Logan Hill, “Internet Killed the MTV Star,” \textit{New York}, May 2, 2010, accessed March 11, 2018, http://nymag.com/arts/popmusic/features/65725/} Vevo, a joint hosting service between the “big three” record companies (Universal, Sony, and Warner), was founded in 2009 before as a way to directly receive advertisement shares from music videos. Suddenly, there was a method of profit that would eventually emerge as the dominating way for all YouTube creators, great and small, to make a living off the platform.

Around this time, Lady Gaga emerged as an artist specifically known for her outlandish visual presentation, a type of pop star that hadn’t been seen at the forefront of pop culture since Britney Spears held a snake over her shoulders. But Gaga was far stranger than Spears, and to some degree even stranger than Madonna; yes, Madonna had pushed the envelope in overt sexuality, occasionally dabbling in sacrilegious conflation with religion, but Gaga was all about \textit{weird} sex, \textit{weird} religion, and all done up in a do-it-yourself, New York art school/ball culture philosophy, even as her video budgets quickly ballooned. How else do you explain the meat dress? Not surprisingly, many found the rise of Lady Gaga to be off-putting and inexplicable, even going to far as to start a rumor that she was actually a man in order to make \textit{more} sense of her persona. On the other hand, it’s the very reason she became a gay icon: queer audiences were able to see the camp in her work, the paradoxical mix of self-seriousness and self-mocking that oozed from her outfits, her stage presence, her videos. She didn’t hide the fact that she was trying to emulate being a pop star like
her idol Madonna before her; instead, she showed her work, quite obviously in fact, and that made her all the more appealing to her fan base.

At the time that Gaga recruited Åkerlund to direct her video for “Paparazzi,” he had come partially out of retirement to work on a handful of projects. Most notably, he directed the 2008 video for P!nk’s “Sober,” a gothic horror video in which, at its climax, the singer makes out with a doppelgänger of herself as a symbolic representation of her alcohol dependency. (Yes, really.) In another scene, P!nk creepily wobbles around a white room in a billowing, ghostly dress and pale pageboy wig, her claw-like nails tapping the walls as she stares blankly at the camera. It’s a jarring series of images, full of disorienting jump cuts and devoid of the rowdy, overt sense of humor P!nk was known for in her work with Dave Meyers, or even the subversive shock comedy that Åkerlund had displayed in his prior work. It was also exactly the type of video imagery that Gaga would later codify, with one crucial difference: the self-aware camp factor, one that was simultaneously off-putting and addictive to watch.

“[‘Paparazzi’] has a real, genuine, powerful message about fame-whoring and death and the demise of the celebrity, and what that does to young people,” Gaga announced shortly before the video’s release. “The video explores ideas about sort of hyperbolic situations that people will go to in order to be famous. Most specifically, pornographer and murderer.”93 “Hyperbolic” is the operative word here. The video for “Paparazzi” opens with an extended dialogue sequence in which Gaga’s lover (played by Alexander Skarsgård), invokes Hitchcock’s Vertigo by throwing her off

the balcony of their Versace mansion, after she discovers that he’s selling her out her image to tabloid photographers. From there on, the video is a lurid drag show of dress-up, choreography, and exaggerated tableaus of celebrity lifestyle, all performed by Gaga herself and her team of backup dancers and with no regard to logic or continuity. For instance, when the injured Gaga first emerges from her limo and climbs into a wheelchair, she’s in a *Thriller*-era Michael Jackson suit with epaulettes and a pale-pink cushion adorning her hair. When she enters the mansion, her butlers help her dress down into black lingerie, while still seated in the chair. In the very next cut, she’s shown in an entirely different outfit, a *Metropolis*-inspired gold-plated number, lifting herself out of the chair with matching crutches. Later in the video, she’s abandoned the crutches and is performing alongside the dancers. There’s a sense of time passing and of Gaga gradually healing from the balcony fall, but we never see her actual recovery, only these disconnected dance sequences that bear no resemblance to reality.

Throughout the video, Åkerlund intercuts gory stills of celebrity androids who have offed themselves in various gruesome ways (slitting wrists in the bathtub, hanging), but the bulk of the video consists of two types of scenes: Gaga on a dimly lit couch, and Gaga dancing in the foyer and ballrooms of the mansion. The latter is very obviously Gaga’s stage, where she performs elaborate sequences with her dancers in myriad outfits, each one a different palette and accessorized in a new form of outlandishness. The couch scenes are more intimate, with Gaga lipsyncing by herself for the majority of the video in skintight black latex. At one point, she’s joined by a Hot Topic-looking bunch of young rockers, all with blonde hairstyles nearly
identical to her own, and they initiate simulated group sex. Finally, in the video’s final sequence, we’re back up in the master bedroom. Gaga poisons her lover’s drink with a bright pink, Pop Rocks-like substance, wearing a sickly yellow-and-black leotard inspired by Minnie Mouse. All of these details paint the video as a hyperrealistic revenge fantasy, one that is “real” and “genuine” only in its unadulterated cynicism towards celebrity life, all while embracing the masquerade element of the whole thing. This is Gaga’s whole shtick, as well as the ethos behind drag and camp: a determination to expose the artificiality of life while falling head-over-heels in love with the artifice. As Susan Sontag famously wrote, “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman.’ To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.”

That kind of artificiality wasn’t unique to Gaga and Åkerlund. OK Go made an extravagant, highly choreographed, highly artificial rendering of what a YouTube viral video was perceived to look like in 2006. Beyoncé made a glossy rendition of an old Bob Fosse routine that was already perfectly campy on its own. These examples of play-acting had to be done in the moving image, rather than as live theater performances, because the types of media that “Here It Goes Again” and “Single Ladies” were playing off of originated as such. In order to work as both tribute and parody, they had to be YouTube videos themselves. In many ways, music video itself is a campy medium: without the luxury of a feature film-length running time, and bounded by the storytelling capabilities of abstract musical expression, videos can

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only ever display the artifice of what they choose to take from, whether that be real life or “high” art forms (cinema, theater, literature) or even “lower” forms of art.

Really, then, the key difference between “Paparazzi” and the earlier viral hits was the source material: “Here It Goes Again” and “Single Ladies” were based on YouTube videos themselves, while “Paparazzi” – in a surprisingly far more conservative move – took from film and celebrity culture the same way that Michael Jackson and Madonna had in years prior. With their bizarre jump cuts and lack of continuity, all Gaga and Åkerlund changed was doing away with trying to make it look authentic whatsoever. Compare “Paparazzi” to something like “Billie Jean” which, for all its dance breakdowns and overtly false scenery and dividing the screen up into quadrants, still has a simplified, linear plot and a somewhat consistent relationship to time. “Vogue” is clearly just an abstraction, avoiding any sort of plot altogether. These videos are what Sontag would refer to as “naïve” camp, pure camp, camp that doesn’t always know that it is camp or, if it is self-aware,

doesn’t try to play up its self-awareness, whereas Gaga’s videos are all about enacting camp for the sake of camp. This is why Gaga could be appalling or simply too weird for audiences: she didn’t always expect or want you to get the joke.

In the revitalization of music videos during the late aughts, I believe both of these approaches were needed: the overt attempts to replicate YouTube videos themselves, and the more traditional – as in, adhering to ‘80s music video tradition – style of play-acting that nonetheless heightened its self-awareness to new levels. “Sober” and “If I Were a Boy” were too earnest in their theatricality; in order for an ‘80s-style video to work in 2009, complete with overblown costumes and

95 Madonna certainly could be.
overwrought plots and endless mannerisms, musicians couldn’t just ignore the darkness and cynicism that had been established within the medium in the ‘90s. They had to embrace and acknowledge what had immediately preceded them. Ultimately, as we’ll explore in later chapters, the meta-YouTube style of videos won out; successful videos of the 2010s like “Hotline Bling” work to blend seamlessly into the online visual landscape where, thanks to platforms like Instagram, the lines between professional and amateur projects have considerably blurred. But in 2009, videos had to prove they could still be capital-e Events, ones that could generate plenty of advertising revenue by getting millions of clicks to the same webpage. They could do that by trying to hit the viral-video jackpot, via dance move or weird catchphrase or building an original gimmick around inanimate objects. Or, they could simply be big and loud.

![Lady Gaga and Beyoncé in “Telephone” (2010).](image)

Figure 8.3: Lady Gaga and Beyoncé in “Telephone” (2010).

Which is exactly what “Telephone” did. This ten-minute music video/short film was “an amalgam of a music video and something else – B-movie, Tarantino-

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96 “Paparazzi” is arguably just as indebted to Mark Romanek’s “Closer” (1994) as anything from the 1980s.
affair, *Natural Born Killers.*” It is *Thelma and Louise* mashed with *Kill Bill* mashed with some gaudy prison exploitation film. It features a flashy “Let’s Make a Sandwich” sequence that doubles as a how-to guide for murder. It is utter trash, and it racked up half a million views in 12 hours, an earth-shattering success at the time. It was also one of the first videos to premiere both on television (E! News) and online (Vevo), pushing the medium further into the digital sphere.

Gaga understood imitation as a way to bring subversive depictions of pop culture to the masses. But her lasting video legacy, whether intentional or not, was a final push for videos to develop on their own terms in the online ether. There, they would evolve into something that sported a similar look and feel of the ‘80s works that so influenced her – especially as full-on 1980s nostalgia began to set in during the 2010s – but serving a far different purpose, always aware of where that advertisement revenue was coming from. There were no longer MTV “VJs” who curated the videos everyone watched. Now, that task was up to each individual viewer to choose where they’d spend their time online, and there was no turning back.

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97 Vernallis, 11.

Chapter 9:
Memes, Nostalgia, and the Instagram Playground of Drake’s “Hotline Bling”

Figure 9.1: the opening shot of Drake in the “Hotline Bling” video (2015).

There’s a weird moment that happens when you’re watching Drake’s “Hotline Bling,” a 2015 video filmed by Director X. Around the two-thirds mark, the moment where a “switch” would occur in a Spike Jonze video, you realize that you’ve been watching basically the same image for the past three minutes. Not in a literal sense – Drake moves from one neon, James Turrell-inspired background to another, there are multiple configurations of backup dancers, etc. But aside from the intro – a strange camera pan over a phone-sex call center – the video is remarkably stationary. It consists of many iterations of the same shot: a dancing Drake, over and over again, boxed inside a morphing rainbow of pastel-colored light. Put in a different context: it’s a living meme, a giant GIF, a trendy Instagram post set to music.
If you’ve spent any time on the internet since “Hotline Bling” dropped – it was initially released on October 19, 2015 as an Apple Music exclusive, then made available on YouTube a week later – you have likely seen a meme made in its image. In fact, you are more likely to have seen a “Hotline Bling” meme than the video itself. On the defunct social platform Vine, where users could post edited clips no longer than six seconds, a #DanceLikeDrake hashtag emerged shortly after the video premiered, in which people filmed themselves replicating Drake’s “corny” dance style. By the time the video was released on YouTube, over 500 Vines had used the hashtag. Soon another hashtag, #DrakeAlwaysOnBeat, cropped up on videos syncing Drake’s dancing to other songs (a play on an earlier meme, #BeyonceAlwaysOnBeat). More complex memes soon arrived on the platform, as well as in the form of YouTube videos and GIFs (animated images) across the online sphere. One clip from the original video, of Drake swishing his hand back and forth low to the ground, generated considerable Photoshop edits: Drake serving with a tennis racket; Drake attempting to put out a fire; Drake waving a light saber; Drake hilariously teaching scientific concepts like sodium-potassium pumps. And that’s not even including the many, many still image memes, repurposing Drake’s gestures and facial expressions in the video to address everything from flipping tortillas to SpongeBob nostalgia to personal preference for one thing over another. (It helped that Drake wore an outlandishly orange puffy jacket for part of the video, because if there’s anything that encourages people to make memes online, it’s something that’s already absurd.) Within two months, Saturday Night Live parodied “Hotline Bling” in a sketch starring
none other than Donald Trump. Within four months, Drake parodied himself in a Super Bowl commercial.

![Figure 9.2: an example of a popular “Hotline Bling” meme.](image)

What was it about “Hotline Bling” that spawned all of this? For starters, much of it had to do with Drake himself: 2015 was the year that Aubrey Drake Graham, a biracial Canadian Jewish rapper who launched his career on the teen television show *Degrassi: The Next Generation* some fifteen-odd years ago, became living memedom. Even if you don’t consider “Hotline Bling,” the quantity of online in-jokes that originated from this one pop star was unheard of. There was the infamous “truss mi daddi!” Vine, in which Drake’s attempt at Caribbean patois (not his first try and far from his last) earned him both mockery and adoration. There was the time Madonna, with dubious consent, kissed Drake onstage; his disgusted reaction was shared all over the Web. There was the scrawled font on the cover art of his 2015 mixtape *If You’re Reading This It’s Too Late*, which was repurposed into a variety of phrases. There were the many, many shirtless selfies on Instagram. And, of course, there was the “beef” with Philadelphia rapper Meek Mill. In pop/hip-hop fandom, the details of this feud are fairly known but inconsequential: something about Meek
accusing Drake of using ghostwriters, and various names in the hip-hop community publicly choosing sides on Twitter. (Even the fast food brand Whataburger got involved, tweeting out, “Meek Mill take it from us- if you gonna serve beef serve it high quality.”) But what really mattered was how Drake responded to the beef at his annual OVO Fest in Toronto, as described by Pitchfork:

Behind Aubrey Graham, a large-screen projection taunted [Meek Mill] with the fast food emporium’s tweet. It was like watching a soccer match decided by a penalty kick from a drunk CFO whose corporation had won naming rights to the stadium. Flanked by fake explosions, Drake rapped “Back 2 Back”, a diss primarily remarkable for its marketing and method of delivery. His PowerPoint also featured an image of Meek Mill sticking a fork into an electric socket, multiple “Fresh Prince of Bel-Air” reaction shots, along with memes based on “The Simpsons”, Friday, and “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire”. Another picture depicted pallbearers carrying a coffin with the caption: “Meek Mill checked out of his hotel this morning.” The most galling (and corny) showed Meek in a white wedding dress alongside a tuxedoed Nicki Minaj. With this endless scroll of meme propaganda, Drake intended to shock and awe New York radio trolls, sixth grade cyber-bullies, and the type of rap fan that responds in the Genius comment section with GIFs from “The Office”.99

If you found most of that to be inscrutable, I don’t blame you. But Drake made his point clear: he was #relevant, he was with the people, and most importantly, he understood that in this day and age, selling one’s brand on social media matters far more than authentically following the code of old-school hip-hop. When it comes to his relationship to the moving image, Drake is everything that George Michael was not: his image is his artistry, the music one piece of the dork-playboy puzzle that is Drake.

And then there’s Director X, Drake’s collaborator, who tends to embody a retro mode of music video production – that is, he’s not afraid to place a musician against an abstract, colorful soundstage, have some fun, and call it a day, as long as that pairing has something interesting to say about the music. He doesn’t prioritize rigorous dance choreography, but rather has his subjects move around the space and seemingly improvise how they’re going to interact with it – which can include dancing, if they’re so moved. One of his earliest videos, Kelis’s “Trick Me” (2003), shows the R&B singer and a cohort of well-dressed friends shimmying around an orange backdrop marked by huge, swooping arrows. In each shot, the arrows may point to or radiate from a set of speakers, the dancers, Kelis herself, or even a silhouette of Director X perched on his camera pod. The fun of the video is him showing off the many compositions he can devise from this one gimmick. It distills the moving image into many different still frames, while also showing awareness of the medium itself: at one point Kelis appears on a television screen, an image within an image that pokes fun at the fact that you were almost certainly watching the video.
on television. (This was 2003, so although video-first MTV was in decline, there was still no YouTube.)

Director X applies a similar trick in “I’m Still in Love With You,” featuring Sean Paul and Sasha. The two of them dance on an orange-and-yellow set and sing over an Alton Ellis backing track, the rocksteady vibe giving the video a laid-back feel. Suddenly, a minute into the video, the camera pulls back to reveal that it’s playing on a television screen. A group of women watch the video in a bedroom; one of them dances in front of a mirror, trying to replicate Sasha’s moves. Zooming back into the TV and out again, we’re now in a man’s bedroom; he’s also trying to dance and show off in front of a mirror. Eventually, these meta-viewers and participants all head out to a party and flirt with one another on the dance floor. It’s as though the video is implying that its sultriness and seduction are contagious. Forget videos selling the music – Director X is selling the video itself.

For the past decade, Director X made a point of keeping up with the looks of the times. “I purposely follow like 6000 people on Instagram,” he said in a recent interview with the music website Genius. “So in my timeline, I get a fairly good idea of what’s impacting.” He insists that he didn’t intend for “Hotline Bling” to become
the viral sensation that it did: “I thought we had made something that our culture
would love, within the hip-hop, Latin music, urban world.” So he was amazed when,
on social platforms that are usually “hyped up” on something for no longer than a day
or two, the “Hotline Bling” craze lasted for a solid week. “It just kept on coming and
coming. This meme and that meme…it says something [about] today’s culture. You
don’t just talk about it, you make something from it...You know when people are
really rocking with it, you know if a music video is really impacting people.”

With its boxed-in, minimalist design and colorful “neon” backgrounds created
by shining lights through stretched-out cloth on frames, there is something about the
“Hotline Bling” video that makes it particularly suited for an image-based platform.
Culture critics were quick to point out its resemblance to the artist James Turrell’s
light installations. (The 72-year-old Turrell’s response: “While I am truly flattered to
learn that Drake fucks with me, I nevertheless wish to make clear that neither I nor
any of my woes was involved in any way in the making of the ‘Hotline Bling’
video.”) It also bears influence from videos and commercials from over a decade
ago. Who could forget Dave Meyers’s landmark commercials for Apple iPod, which
also used dancing silhouettes against flat rainbow backdrops? Or what about Director
X’s own 2002 video for Sean Paul’s “Gimme The Light,” with its similar lit
backdrops and its identical scenes of a man dancing with choreographer Tanisha
Scott? (The man was Drake in “Hotline Bling” and Director X in “Gimme The

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100 “The Making of Drake’s ‘Hotline Bling’ Video With Director X | Framework,” Genius,
101 Alissa Walker, “Artist James Turrell ‘Truly Flattered’ That Drake Ripped Off His Work in
New Video,” Gizmodo, October 22, 2015, accessed February 24, 2018,
The director himself even admitted to this callback: “[‘Hotline Bling’] is an upped version of ‘Gimme The Light,’ even down to the fact that these are lit sets…and in this case, it’s Drake as Director X, or Little X if you really wanna get specific,” he adds, referencing the Tanisha Scott clips with a laugh.¹⁰²

Figure 9.5: James Turrell’s Dhatu (2009, left) and Sean Paul’s “Gimme the Light” (2002, right).

But if we’re being sensible here, the social media influencers in their teens and early 20s on Instagram and Vine are probably not thinking of James Turrell or “Gimme The Light” when they make a “Hotline Bling” meme. The video stands out not for its visually interesting set pieces alone, but because it pairs them with something as ridiculous as Drake’s candid dancing. What’s more, the type of neon-inspired, pastel-colored aesthetic that “Hotline Bling” is pushing is not just a nostalgic look anymore; it’s the defining visual style of Instagram, fashion blogs, much of contemporary art, and overall millennial “cool” culture. And it certainly hasn’t escaped other music videos, either – starting around the time of Lady Gaga’s “The Edge of Glory” (2011), which took several style reference points from “Billie Jean,” the retro ‘80s video look has proliferated today’s pop videos, complete with

neon piping, fog machines, and a pastel color palette. Last year, Marianne Eloise wrote of the trend for Vice’s music vertical Noisey:

Obviously, it looks good. It’s like millennial pink: you might be sick of seeing it everywhere, but do you actually think it’s ugly? No – it’s soothing and inoffensive at best, like an Instagram of someone’s bathwater right after they dropped a Lush bomb in it. But, at the same time, you can’t scroll down your YouTube recommendations these days without being confronted by a pop video that looks like it was shot at someone’s prom in the 80s.  

Recently, the look can be seen everywhere from Kendrick Lamar’s “These Walls” (2015) and Justin Bieber’s “What Do You Mean?” (2015) to the 1975’s “The Sound” (2016) and Kelela’s “LMK” (2017). The softer varieties of “Instagram aesthetics,” highlighting more of the pastel than the neon, can be seen in Charli XCX’s sugar-sweet “Boys” (2017) and St. Vincent’s 2017 videos for “New York” and “Los Ageless” – parades of pastel “millennial” pink together with “flat colors [and] bodies swaddled completely in latex,” as described by New York magazine’s Sasha Geffen.  

The neon and pastel aren’t always presented together, and could be considered separate aesthetic trends, but their simultaneous return in music videos and on social platforms does beg the question: why these two, and why now? As is the case for any trend, there’s no one simple answer, but it can be partially chalked up to revived 1980s nostalgia – with Blade Runner-esque science fiction films coming back into the mainstream – as well as consideration for what sorts of colors and lighting look best

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when shot on digital cameras and consumed on digital screens. (Hint: neon and pastel look really good on digital.) It’s also worth considering the sociocultural implications of these trends: as gender norms and identities have grown more flexible, softer versions of the traditionally gendered blue and pink have grown in popularity, as though to say, “These aren’t so hardwired anymore, and now anyone can use them.” And after all, many of the video stars of the ‘80s – Bowie, Prince, Michael Jackson, Madonna, George Michael – experimented with gender representation onscreen. As modern pop stars look back to their idols, taking influence from their music, fashion, and philosophies, some of the older musicians’ Band Wagon-y video aesthetics might be brushing off as well.

Figure 9.6: clockwise from top left, Lady Gaga’s “The Edge of Glory” (2011); Kendrick Lamar’s “These Walls” (2015); St. Vincent’s “New York” (2017); and Charli XCX’s “Boys” (2017).

In any case, this style isn’t limited to music videos. It’s permeated out into other visual media, such as the neon-and-synth films of Nicolas Refn (Drive, Only
God Forgives, The Neon Demon); the television show Riverdale; a whole plethora of album covers; and the “San Junipero” episode of Black Mirror. (The latter, mixed with a heavy dose of Prince, bears huge visual similarity to Janelle Monáe and Alan Ferguson’s latest video, for the song “Make Me Feel.” The queer-themed video’s heavy use of blues, pinks, and purples, as also seen in Atomic Blonde and other films that follow the trend, has earned the winking nickname “bisexual lighting.”

Meanwhile, whole physical art installations such as the “Double America 2” neon sign at The Broad in Los Angeles, the LED walkthroughs at the Panorama Festival in New York, and the pink-and-lavender confectionaries at the traveling Museum of Ice Cream all seem to materialize as bait for the Instagram crowd. Alyssa Bereznak, writing for Bill Simmons’ website The Ringer, coined the term “Instagram playgrounds” to describe these locations:

As our smartphone cameras have become more capable, we have pushed past the novelty of a disposable selfie into professionalized aesthetics that grab attention on a rectangular screen...In response to the ever frantic demand for trendy environments, digital strategists and brands have joined forces to sidestep museums, restaurants, or businesses that double as nice backdrops—and skip straight to the backdrop itself. The result is a new category of photographic monuments that exist somewhere between a magazine-level photo shoot and a billboard ad.

If you’ve ever stood in line for one of Yayoi Kusama’s immensely popular Infinity Mirrored Rooms, you’ve waited to experience a twinkling Instagram playground. Or, if you’ve ever walked into a restaurant with plenty of sunlight, soft pink furniture and “photogenically” kitschy décor, that’s an Instagram playground, too. And while

105 Geffen, “Bisexual Lighting.”
James Turrell has created his light installations for decades, they would also count in with the present moment.

Often, these spaces are photographed not to hide their artifice but to embrace it. In photos you’ll notice the corners where the walls meet, the texture of the plastic furniture, the wiring hooked up to the neon signage. The effervescence around such obvious ploys for free advertisement might be baffling to most people, but for avid Instagram users, the benefits are a two-way street: like ‘80s video sets, Instagram playgrounds are designed to showcase the people within them and make them look good. The artifice matters little when you can get professional-grade lighting and an extended photoshoot with only a $10 admission charge. These are real-life stages for digital performances.

Which brings us back to “Hotline Bling.” Director X always frames Drake and his dance partners within soft-lit boxes or near them – for instance, ascending up a towering staircase towards a glowing, neon-bordered cube. The first shot literally zooms in on Drake inside a box until the box’s borders and the video’s frame become one and the same – here is Drake, presented to you as a picture-perfect image. As for his dorky dancing, one reading is that Drake is mocking the self-serious tone of the song (an earnest moping over a love who doesn’t call him anymore). He might even be mocking the contemporary art world that the video’s style takes from. But the location for “Hotline Bling” isn’t actually that highbrow, and Drake knows it – he waltzes around like a teenager at the Museum of Ice Cream, improvising a few poses while his friend snaps some iPhone pics. Much has been said and written about the objectification of backup dancers and models in music videos, but here they really are
treated as almost asexual props; they’re filmed as silhouettes, literal shadows of what you’d expect to see on such a production. They, too, feel like part of an artificial tourist trap.

“Hotline Bling,” with its cool edges and campy gestures, straddles the line between working beautifully as any individual frame and needing to be seen in its entirety. But it functions, at its best, as a building block, sparking the imaginations of wannabe influencers and online jokesters. It understands that today’s cultural artifacts are only brought to fruition half-completed: a visually pleasing TV show is nothing without online fans to discuss it. An Instagram playground is nothing without tourists to populate it, without thousands of hashtagged photographs to stem from it. And perhaps we’ve reached a point where a music video is nothing without its ability to be re-shared, reshaped, and rebuilt by those who watch it.
Chapter 10: Kendrick Lamar’s Continued Vision Through Video

Kendrick Lamar is frequently cited as a rapper who approaches his videos with serious, creative intention. To employ a perhaps over-used term for great recording artists, he’s a perfectionist, as is apparent in his discography of critically acclaimed, politically charged LPs; each one carries a clear-eyed, singular vision that supports Lamar’s reputation as a West Coast hip-hop icon. But while he’s thought of as a kind of musical auteur, what’s allowed Lamar to ascend as far and as quickly as he has is his ability to collaborate beautifully with other talented musicians, videographers, and artists. The bass guitarist and vocalist Thundercat, a frequent collaborator with Lamar, once described working with Kendrick as “being kneaded like a piece of dough. It felt like someone was bending and stretching and pulling different things out.”  

Lamar brings his personal experiences and influences, musical or otherwise, to the forefront of his work and encourages his collaborators to do the same, shaping their shared vision while never losing sight of individual prowess or timely urgency. (Thundercat, along with Kamasi Washington, provided jazz and funk instrumentation on Lamar’s 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly*, invoking multiple genres of black music to paint a portrait of contemporary African-American experience.)

Lamar has collaborated with a number of prominent pop videographers – Director X, Colin Tilley, Nabil Elderkin, and Dave Meyers, to name a few. Lamar

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and Dave Free, his manager and president of Top Dawg Entertainment, are almost always credited as co-directors, under the pseudonym “The Little Homies.” Their involvement makes it so that Kendrick’s videos contain a synthesized iconography. Director X’s “King Kunta” and Colin Tilley’s “Alright,” both produced in support of To Pimp a Butterfly, carry echoes of past hip-hop videos by Lamar’s West Coast idols, while nevertheless maintaining the attributes of each videographer’s directorial style.

Figure 10.1: Kendrick Lamar’s “King Kunta” (2015).

Director X could be considered part of the pantheon of dance-oriented hip-hop videographers – he’s cited Hype Williams as a mentor\(^\text{108}\) – but his background as a graphic designer informs his focus on distinctive, abstract set design and unique color palettes for each of his projects. His collaboration with Kendrick, on “King Kunta,”

depicts Lamar’s hometown of Compton in a soft vignette, framed within a square aspect ratio best suited for photos on Instagram. Sepia-toned yellows appear on Lamar’s jacket, on the walls of the convenience store he raps inside, and on the historic buildings he stands in front of; during the shots where Lamar is seated on a golden throne, a more extreme sepia color filter is layered on top. These are punctuated by blue-tinted images of Kendrick performing inside of a house, and of a motorcycle rider popping wheelies in a parking lot. The yellow-and-blue dichotomy bears resemblance to the works of David Fincher, but here Director X is specifically invoking the washed-out fade of old Polaroids. The images and locations we’re seeing are from Lamar’s childhood and adolescence.

The editing of the video goes a step further than just cutting on the beat – it also closely follows the flow of Lamar’s rapping. At the third verse, most of the instrumentation cuts out and Lamar adopts a pointed, choppy flow as he raps about “kill[ing] a couple rappers, but they did it to themselves.” Meanwhile, the camera tracks Kendrick walking sideways through a parking lot in one continuous shot. As he stalks and raps, extras walk out from behind parked cars, flexing and almost daring the viewer to try and go up against the newly-declared king of West Coast hip-hop. This shot and others in the video resemble classic LA hip-hop videos such as Dr.

109 Director X also demonstrates a careful consideration for how audiences will be exposed to his work, and how they’ll react to it. His earlier videos alluded to being shown on MTV and other television stations. His most recent projects like “Hotline Bling” follow Instagram trends and generate memes.

110 Thematically, “King Kunta” the song is about Lamar calling out lesser rappers who refuse to step up their game. He especially takes umbrage with artists who use ghostwriters (often at the pressure of their labels) because he believes it to be “suicidal” for their credibility. The title is a reference to Kunta Kinte, a fictional slave and the protagonist of the novel-turned-miniseries *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, who refused to submit to his white slaveowners.
Dre’s “Nuthin’ But a ‘G’ Thang” and “Still D.R.E.” and 2Pac’s “California Love,” complete with the hyper-masculine presence often invoked by ‘90s gangster rap. The vignette framing and sepia tints add to the nostalgia and proper homage that Lamar is paying to West Coast hip-hop’s forbearers, but they also suggest a passing of the torch; the king-on-the-throne imagery is almost redundant.

In contrast to Director X’s highly graphic style of filmmaking, Colin Tilley’s origin and style track closer to Spike Jonze’s. Born and raised in Oakland, Tilley got his start directing DIY videos at the request of his friends within the local hip-hop/skater scene. Before he even knew what a crane shot was, he would stand precariously on the roof of his friend’s SUV, holding the camera high above his head to get an overhead angle. While the budgets for his videos have grown exponentially, Tilley still prefers to shoot on location, contrasting a streetwise, “gritty” realism with an often celebratory atmosphere; he gravitates toward party videos, like DJ Khaled and Rihanna’s “Wild Thoughts” from last year. Which makes “Alright” – a video for which he won the Best Direction VMA – a somewhat unusual assignment for Tilley. The song itself is an anthem of protest, a refrain of optimism against police brutality, a staple chant at Black Lives Matter rallies. Like “King Kunta,” the video for “Alright” holds some of that optimism but carries the ominous weight of Kendrick’s two lives: as an legendary figure in music, and as a black man in America.

The video begins with high-contrast, black-and-white shots around Oakland’s port, punctuating by the sound of Kendrick’s scream against an image of flashing

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tunnel lights. We see shoes hanging off telephone wires; skyscrapers looming overhead; an empty gravel lot between two wooden huts; a skateboarder leaping into the air and then, in the next cut, vanishing from space. In the next shot, the skateboarder lies unmoving on the ground as Kendrick, in voiceover, recites his “I remember you was conflicted…” monologue heard throughout *To Pimp a Butterfly*. These short vignettes at the beginning of “Alright” quickly grow more violent, evolving into images of police arrests, bloodied protestors, and rioters throwing Molotov cocktails. They paint a picture of what Tilley calls “the m.A.A.d. city,” a reference to the title of Lamar’s previous album.

![Figure 10.2: stills from Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” (2015).](image)

To Tilley and Lamar, the m.A.A.d. city isn’t referring to Los Angeles, Oakland, or any other physical place, but rather to a very stark reality of life-or-death struggle
within black America. As Tilley explained in an interview with MTV News, “It basically shows the state of everything that’s going on in the world right now. It’s also showing how one man can basically spread positivity through all of the madness that’s going on and how everything is gonna be alright.”

This theme of Lamar as the “one man” who can “spread positivity through all of the madness” appears in several of the video’s iconic images. The first one, immediately following the “m.A.A.d. city” monologue, depicts Kendrick driving a car; his labelmates Schoolboy Q, Ab-Soul and Jay Rock are his passengers. The car is moving at a snail’s pace and appears to be hovering several feet above the ground, but the camera doesn’t show anything below the door handles. It’s only after a song – an original song Kendrick produced for the video – starts to play over the radio, and Kendrick and his buddies bob and rap along for around 10 seconds, that the camera eases back and reveals that the car is being carried by four white policemen, one on each wheel, all of them buckling under the weight. Tilley describes the process of creating the scene with Lamar:

We were talking about this specific image with everything that’s going on right now with the police and...we were talking about this big reveal with Kendrick and the guys being held up by cops like a carriage or something. But the crazy part is, when we’re sitting there, all of a sudden, Kendrick was like, "Hold on, man. I’m totally hearing something completely different for this right now...we’ll do this song as a segment before the video even starts." So, they sent me the song like two days later and we continued to build on it. Once you get an image that strong, everything builds from there.

113 Ibid.
To return to Thundercat’s point of “being kneaded like a piece of dough,” Lamar demonstrates an auteurrist sensibility here, shaping and stretching every detail of the work with Tilley until it’s the nearest to perfection. They know that if you can perfect a single image or motif within a five-minute-long work, you’ve won half the battle. If you can perfect three or four motifs, you’re all but guaranteed a classic. In “Alright,” these subsequent devices are: Kendrick hovering above the ground and moving steadily through the Oakland air; a visual recreation of the To Pimp a Butterfly cover; break-dancers performing in front of a towering wall of boom boxes in a warehouse parking lot; Kendrick standing confidently, impossibly, atop a light pole next to the Staples Center.

These motifs provide a sense of optimism, if a highly precarious one. In one shot, Lamar teeters on the light pole, although it’s blink-and-you’ll-miss-it. We’ve already seen him defy the laws of physics, floating literally and metaphorically above the hardships of the streets. When a police officer looks up at Lamar on the light post and points a finger gun at him, we don’t initially register it as a serious threat. But then the officer mimes pulling the trigger, mouthing the word “pow,” and we get a shooting sound effect. But it’s not until we cut away to Lamar, his body falling backwards, a stream of blood cascading from his back, that we’re confronted with the very real threat of danger he’s in. Perhaps Kendrick Lamar, famed celebrity and so-called greatest rapper alive, won’t die in this sort of tragically ordinary act of police brutality.

But his greatest fear, outlined in To Pimp a Butterfly, is that fame will remove all facets of personal responsibility he has left. His actions at the top – and the
mainstream (white) media’s perceptions of those actions – will ultimately influence the injustices that his people back home face at the bottom. In his review of *To Pimp a Butterfly* for Pitchfork, Craig Jenkins surmises that Lamar’s philosophy steers “dangerously close to respectability politics” but ultimately finds it admirable: “This is an album about tiny quality of life improvements to be made in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. It might not be the message we want in a year where systemic police and judicial inequality have cost many the ultimate price, but that doesn’t bankrupt it of value.”

As Kendrick is shot off the light post and plummets to the ground, he recites another version of his monologue: “I remember you was conflicted/Misusing your influence/Sometimes I did the same/Abusing my power/Full of resentment/Resentment that turned into a deep depression/Found myself screaming in the hotel room/I didn’t want to self-destruct.” In the context of the standalone video, he could be speaking to anyone, even to the white officer who just shot him in what was undeniably an abuse of power.

Lamar’s politics have evolved since 2015, and his most recent album, *DAMN.*, acts as a rebuttal to his status as a heroic hip-hop icon. In particular, it sharply tackles the effect that violence during Kendrick’s upbringing and in his community has affected him. Two videos from that album, “HUMBLE.” and “ELEMENT.”, both tackle these themes of violence and influence, but with very different styles and perspectives. “HUMBLE.”, the lead single, is intended for a wider audience (hence being directed by Dave Meyers) and takes on a satirical, biting tone towards hip-

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hop’s cult of personality. “ELEMENT.,” directed by German photographer Jonas Lindstroem, is much more subversive in its form, and more explicit in its violence.

“HUMBLE.” combines Kendrick’s standard motifs and Meyers’ brash showmanship with popular iconography. As with many of Meyers’ videos, “HUMBLE.” moves from one scene or idea to another at a rapid-fire pace, although even in the context of his other work, “HUMBLE.” stands out as extreme in this regard. Across its three minutes and four seconds, here are just a few of the scenarios introduced:

1. Kendrick in a misty church, dressed as the pope
2. Kendrick lying on a table of counterfeit cash, surrounded by women in bikinis and facemasks counting the dough
3. Kendrick in a neon hair salon
4. A “fisheye” effect in which a giant Kendrick rides his bicycle on a tiny globe
5. Kendrick driving a golf ball off a car roof, parked in the middle of the LA River’s concrete channel
6. Kendrick surrounded by black, bald men in identical black pullovers, bobbing their heads to the beat
7. Kendrick’s head on fire, surrounded by other black men whose heads are covered in ropes (and also on fire)
8. A brief interlude into comparing a female model’s before-and-after-Photoshop photos
9. Another strange Meyers effect, this time rapidly panning the camera around a scholarly-dressed Kendrick as he stands under a bridge;
10. A Last Supper recreation

Meyers introduces each scene for one portion of the song (three or four bars, at most), only briefly returning to certain scenes with quick inserts (i.e. cutting back to Priest Kendrick or Pullover Kendrick for one of the many repetitions of the phrase “be humble”). Only in the last thirty seconds or so do we get a full montage of the previously seen clips. With all of these embellished set pieces so indulgently tossed together, it’s one of the most extravagant non-dance-centric music videos ever made,
a showstopping crowd-pleaser that bombards the viewer with lush imagery to tackle the very notion of hip-hop iconography itself. Suffice it to say, the video went on to earn seven MTV VMA nominations, six of which it won, including Video of the Year. (The one prize the non-dancing-centric video didn’t scoop up was Best Choreography.)

“HUMBLE.” is undeniably a well-made video, especially in the context of current video stylings (i.e. prioritizing the quality of still images and icons over movement). But aside from a higher production value than most 2010s music videos, there’s nothing particularly unique about the structure of the video or how it informs the song it’s promoting. It moves between seemingly disparate but thematically similar tableaus without a true “master” shot. Though Meyers cuts back several times to Kendrick in the pope outfit during the video’s first third, he abandons that thread around the point that “HUMBLE.” hits its first chorus, not returning to it until the ending montage. What sets this apart from Meyers’ earlier videos is its captivating
imagery, taken from Lamar’s own mythology. And while the video could be considered a challenge to hip-hop iconography and Lamar’s own status as its reigning king, it can just as easily be interpreted as an affirmation on both those things. “HUMBLE.” the song has been read as both a jab at Kendrick’s competitors and a self-critique to “be humble” in the face of fame and fortune. But the video doesn’t really dig deep into either meaning. Perhaps because it is so totally focused on the imagery, and not with building a structural narrative, it neither affirms Kendrick’s status as the heir to hip-hop’s throne (“King Kunta”), nor tries to make the viewer empathize with Kendrick’s personal conflicts (“Alright”). “HUMBLE.” instead functions as a “symbolic” Rolodex of themes Kendrick has touched on before: fame, black oppression, class conflicts, divine worship of one’s heroes, “natural beauty” in black women. One by one, they grace the screen with tenuous connection to each other, held only together by the star at its center. Per Meyers’ usual style, Kendrick always appears “15 percent larger than life,” benefiting from the same iconography he’s trying to critique.

That being said, Lamar addresses the issue of iconography much more coherently in “ELEMENT.,” another video from DAMN.’s album cycle; here, he’s tackling the good and bad effects of iconography on both its subjects and consumers. Like “HUMBLE.,” “ELEMENT.” is mainly a series of tableaus, done in a highly photographic and somewhat surrealist style. Unlike “HUMBLE.,” however, not all of the tableaus in “ELEMENT.” place Kendrick at their center; rather, they contain a variety of subjects, some individual while others in pairs or groups, but all of them contributing to a lattice of multigenerational violence and everyday oppression.
There’s a tangibly ominous presence to the video, which opens with a hand rising out of a pool of water in an undisclosed location. (The clear dark blue of the water and lack of borders suggest the ocean, but the lighting over the water’s surface makes it look highly artificial, as though it were contained on a soundstage.) After that, rapid cuts show us, in quick succession:

1. A blurry street brawl breaks out in the background of the shot, while being filmed on an iPhone in the foreground. The iPhone’s owner is depicted as little more than a hand.
2. A dazed-looking black man in a white suit, sitting in the middle of a street at night. Blood cascades down his head and the front of his jacket. A mysterious shadow moves behind him.
3. A small crowd of young black men, women, and children, their backs turned to us, watching a wooden shed engulfed in flames.

The images that follow, many of them moving in slow-motion, tellingly carry a photographer’s viewpoint of unreality. Even as the shots purport to contain the “everyday,” “ordinary” violence of black life, they also appear detached and suspiciously staged. When a black father is shown motioning and begging for his
young son to slap him across the face, it works as a metaphor for the unseen director(s) commanding the child to perform the very same act. Many of the shots are diagonally cater-cornered from their subjects, while looking up or down at them from extreme high and low angles. This makes them appear even more trapped, more unreal. In a sick play on typical dance choreography within music videos, a grid of black men in dress shirts practice their punches in stoic, drill team-like unison; they’re cornered off diagonally within a stiff, wood-paneled room with a deep, dark abyss for one wall. In a contrasting shot, a group of skinhead prisoners directly address the camera, separated from the viewer only by what looks like the blown-up surface of a dog cage; later in the video, white policemen dressed in Civil Rights-era uniforms are seen through the inside of a car windshield. Alluding to the song’s title, several shots utilize different elemental substances in creative, staged ways: fire, water, sleet, dust, light. When Kendrick does appear in the video, his portrayal is either ambiguous (a dark silhouette in a doorway, a stumbling figure walking along a massive concrete wall) or shockingly aggressive (beating up a man in the street; moving to whack someone with a pool cue for pointing a finger gun at him\footnote{This might be a callback to “Alright,” or it’s possible that bringing a real gun into “ELEMENT.” would have detracted from its visceral, melee-heavy style.}; charging out the back of a pickup truck with the same group of men from the street brawl). In an otherwise unadorned shot of him rapping in front of the camera, a smear of blood stains his white T-shirt.

Evan Puschak, a filmmaker and creator of the YouTube channel The Nerdwriter, eloquently outlines how “ELEMENT.” succeeds as a work of art in a
video essay titled “ELEMENT: How Kendrick Lamar Collaborates.” Puschak bases his argument on Lamar and Dave Free’s two primary collaborators for “ELEMENT.”, one of them being the director, Jonas Lindstroem. “‘ELEMENT.’ is highly reminiscent of Lindstroem’s previous work, namely his short film Truth or Dare, which features twenty-one ‘performances’ or ‘vignettes.’ Together, these are meant to be “‘an elevated version of the content found on mobile phones,’” notes Puschak, citing a quote from Lindstrom in an interview with the German arts magazine 032c:

I imagined an elevated version of the content found on mobile phones around the world. I wanted to condense these very specific actions and emotions into single, focussed [sic] cinematic frames. I quite like the idea of depicting situations that can serve as reference points for a specific place in time. The content of these 21 performances is vastly different, depicting very small and very big actions, poetry and cruelty, hope and ecstasy, isolation and despair, but they could all happen at the exact same moment – their context is the same. When you see them coming together, they create a deeper sense, forming a new whole.

Lindstroem explores the boundaries between still photography and the moving image through what Puschak refers to as “slow-moving tableaus,” and like the ones in “HUMBLE.,” the tableaus in Truth or Dare arrive moment to moment, as though you were scrolling through them one-by-one on an app. Lindstroem’s disaffected style allows the viewer to think critically about the violent, sexually explicit, and exploitative imagery presented to them. At several points, he returns to tableaus

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introduced earlier in the film, and he’s incredibly precise in their ordering. A man falling from the sky, reminiscent of Richard Drew’s infamous “Falling Man” photograph, is match-cut with a pornographic video that a teenager watches on his phone. A blurry close-up of the rapper Travis Scott passionately mouthing a verse cuts to an aerial view of a white car, slowly and deliberately ramming into a lookalike parked in a field, and then cuts to a black modern dancer performing against a bright orange background. A knife slicing through skin turns into police advancing in riot gear. A punch turns into a kiss. The film’s epigraph muses, “That sharp pain you wonder about sometimes is felt by us all.”

The tableau in “ELEMENT.” also serve as references points for a larger environment and visual language. It’s not hard to spot the parallels to the police brutality that’s been captured on cell phones in the Black Lives Matter era, or to the exploitative videos of black-on-black violence made famous by the blog WorldStarHipHop, which markets the amateur videos as comedy. But while Lindstroem’s fusion of photographic, cinematic, and digital aesthetics is nothing short of groundbreaking, Lamar’s involvement adds an extra layer to it – a nuanced reflection on “the violence that’s been an inescapable fact on [his] environment for his whole life.” Violence is not a new subject matter for Lamar, and it’s a deeply personal one to him, having been involved in gangs and shootouts while growing up in Compton. But as Jenkins alluded to in his To Pimp a Butterfly review, Lamar’s views on the violence and hardships in his community have sparked criticism from civil rights activists, who have interpreted his “improve your life in little ways and

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118 The film’s score, too, hints at a kind of escalation, starting as a droning electric guitar and morphing into a heavy industrial club track.
it’ll all be better” approach as lukewarm respectability politics. They’ve also predictably provoked right-wing media, who view Kendrick’s lyrics as glorifying gang violence. But through its many tableaus, “ELEMENT.” is Lamar’s most honest and multi-faceted depiction of violence yet, neither glorifying its existence nor offering easy solutions for prevention or repair. It does this by depicting violence not as an individual problem, but as a collective societal issue springing from multigenerational trauma, systematic racism, and long-entrenched expectations of masculinity, particularly black masculinity. (Besides the hut-burning sequence, there are only two other depictions of women in “ELEMENT.”, both of them non-violent: a group of black nuns, and a naked lover of a male character in bed.) Says Puschak:

[Lamar] has examined [violence] from every angle, looking at the violence that he’s endured, sometimes at the hands of those closest to him (“I been stomped out in front of my momma/My daddy commissary made it to commas/Bitch, all my grandmas dead/So ain’t nobody prayin’ for me, I’m on your head”); the violence he’s caused, the violence used to oppress his race, and the violence his friends and family visit on themselves. Each of these facets of violence is distilled into a photographic moment. Some of them connect. But they’re scrambled, drawing you into this churning cycle of violence that is the result of these distinct images.120

As Puschak goes on to note, DAMN. as an album rebukes Kendrick’s “perceived divine status” in the wake of To Pimp a Butterfly’s rapturous acclaim. In “ELEMENT.” he’s stating that he’s not above the violence perceived in his community, and rather than glorifying or condemning it, he simply wants to depict the violence in an honest attempt to understand it. His and Lindstroem’s approach on “ELEMENT.” ultimately succeeds where “HUMBLE.” fails in this regard, in part because it draws on past attempts at depicting racial oppression in a frank, nuanced

120 Ibid.
light. Besides Lindstroem, the other “collaborator” Puschak cites is Gordon Parks, the deceased photojournalist and filmmaker, renowned for his photos depicting African-Americans throughout the Civil Rights era. Three shots in “ELEMENT.” are direct references to Parks photographs: 1) a little girl lying asleep in a field, holding a ladybug on a string, 2) the black nuns in white habits, and 3) three children – two black, one white – with the black child in the center aiming a gun. “The power of [Park’s] photography is that it forces people to see what would otherwise remain invisible to them,” notes Puschak. “Parks was heralded for his ability to get close to his subjects, to earn her trust, so that he could illuminate the intimate truths of their lives.”

The result of this extended collaboration and web of influence is a video that exhausts potential explorations of violence within Kendrick’s sphere of reality. It also functions, quite beautiful, as jumping-off point for how we might choose to depict violence within the medium going forward.

Kendrick Lamar is just one example of a contemporary musician who acts as a visual auteur, but he is one of the most consistent in terms of thematic material and collaborative acumen. Even when his directors don’t entirely align with the path he’s charted for himself, Lamar can lift a videographer’s trademarks to new heights and

121 Ibid.
repurpose their use for new emotional territory. It may seem contradictory for an artist so focused on the perfection of his music to fuss over auxiliary materials, but Kendrick knows the videos can, and must, be part of the message. Going forward, it’s easy to imagine Kendrick Lamar’s dedication to music videos laying the groundwork for future artists, seeing the potential in the medium, to continue on with his legacy.
Chapter 11:
New Auteurs in the Digital Age

So where are music videos going now? This, as you can imagine, is impossible to answer definitively, because we can’t be sure where the internet is going or where visual media as a whole is going. But we can start by looking at some of the recent standout videos – and their emerging directors, and their critics – to spot potential markers of new innovation.

Melina Matsoukas has been a prominent videographer for the past decade – her first major breakthrough was a series of Beyoncé videos in 2007 – but like other pop directors her style has noticeably shifted from two-dimensionality to a rounder, more social platform-friendly look to coincide with the 2010s. Her performers “have backs” to them now, not simply parading in front of a backdrop, and there’s often an exquisite pastel sheen overlaying her work. Underneath it all, Matsoukas’ greatest weapon is to sneak high concepts into otherwise standard pop treatments. Her 2007 video for Beyoncé’s “Upgrade U,” for instance, has the singer portraying both herself and her husband Jay-Z – yes, Beyoncé dresses in drag and lip-syncs to the rap mogul’s featured verse. In Lily Allen’s “Not Fair” (2009), Matsoukas runs with the song’s country populist influences and, echoing Spike Jonze’s “Buddy Holly” tribute to Happy Days, places Allen inside a recreation of The Porter Wagoner Show. Her 2012 video for Solange Knowles’ “Losing You” is a sun-kissed cousin to Janet Jackson’s “Got ‘Till It’s Gone” video, another love letter to the art and fashion of South Africa.

But Matsoukas’ masterwork is 2011’s “We Found Love,” with Rihanna and Calvin Harris, a video that veers on undermining its song’s giddy premise. It starts off
portraying Rihanna and her boyfriend, played by the British boxer/model Dudley O’Shaughnessy, in an idyllic millennial relationship, complete with trips to a dance festival, hijinks at a retro arcade, and plenty of drug use. She and her boyfriend seem like the sort of people who would love Calvin Harris’s exuberant, carefree music. A green-tinted, washed-out look is present on the film, as though the footage were sprayed in mint-flavored cotton candy fizz; the childlike aesthetic underscores the copious amounts of smoking and sex. When Rihanna dances alone in a room covered in huge projections, stock footage of blooming flowers and zooming traffic is displayed behind her, like a contemporary version of Åkerlund’s “Ray of Light.”

But as the song grows more chaotic in its ecstasy – repeating the refrain “We found love in a hopeless place” over and over again like a desperate chant, as the electronic beats launch into the stratosphere – we see that the central relationship isn’t as perfect as we thought. In quick succession, the video cuts to: Rihanna’s boyfriend aggressively shaking a slot machine after he loses; Rihanna playing darts, missing the bullseye, and looking distraught; and, briefly, security footage of a collapsing

*Figure 11.1: Rihanna’s “We Found Love” (2011).*
building. The rest of the video is filled with these juxtapositions, returning to images we previously saw and showing them in a new light; scenes where Rihanna initially looked happy now show her yelling at her boyfriend to stop the car, stop yelling at her, stop tattooing the word “mine” onto her buttocks. The projections she dances in front of are no longer blooming orchids, but a house engulfed in flames. The boyfriend spits out his beer. Rihanna vomits up rainbow confetti. The video ends with the pop singer leaving their shared apartment, slamming the door behind her.

Critics at the time noted that “We Found Love” resembled a short film, although the only bit of spoken word was an intro monologue, by English model Agyness Deyn. Comparisons to Trainspotting, Blue Valentine, and Requiem for a Dream were thrown about, as were speculations that the video was based on Rihanna’s own abusive relationship with Chris Brown. “It’s a Trainspotting-meets-Drugstore-Cowboy portrait of wasted youth and finding love in an apparently very pharmaceutical place,” Leah Greenblatt wrote for Entertainment Weekly’s website. “But does it paint a too-glamorous portrait of crazy, stupid love for her young fans? Or is it RiRi’s prerogative to push the boundaries of dilated pupils, couch sex, and how many cigarettes two people can conceivably smoke simultaneously? (Apparently, the answer is nine.) Let us know in the comments below.”

Various advocacy groups couldn’t help but chime in as well: there was so much controversy generated around “We Found Love” from all directions – a rape crisis center in the UK, a youth pastor center on Staten Island, the Parents Television Council – that it is one of the few music videos to have its own Wikipedia page, despite being only four-

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and-a-half minutes long. (“Telephone” doesn’t even get that honor.) What’s most
telling about the mass reaction, however, is not how quickly music critics named
potential reference points for “We Found Love,” but how shocked they seemed that a
video could make references, period. “Obviously, there are a lot of comparisons to
[Rihanna’s] real life, and that’s not at all the intention,” Matsoukas told MTV News.
“People naturally go there because art imitates life, and it’s a story we can all relate to
and we’ve all experienced.” Five years later, Matsoukas would go on to direct
Beyoncé’s “Formation” video, the lead single from Lemonade and a bold
proclamation of black American identity. In one scene, Beyoncé dances atop a
sinking police car in the flooded suburbs of post-Katrina New Orleans; in another, a
young black boy in a hoodie breakdances in front of a line of officers in riot gear.
With that video, there was no questioning the references nor the intentions.

Not all groundbreaking directors are so flashy in their subversion – some of
them just want to make better party videos. Alan Ferguson, known to the music press
primarily as Mr. Solange Knowles, has built a career on this particular genre. In
2008, he directed “Green Light” for John Legend, featuring the Southern hip-hop icon
André 3000. It begins by following a pair of women into an upscale house party,
where Legend plays a classy but milquetoast tune on the piano. None of the
pleasantly chatting guests seem interested. In frustration, Legend slams down the
fallboard and stands up, to which André, one of the party guests, quips, “Well, time to
go,” as the other guests look on in shock. Legend then starts singing “Green Light,”

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123 Jocelyn Vena, “Rihanna’s ‘We Found Love’ Video Tells ‘Everybody’s’ Story,” MTV
News, October 21, 2011, accessed March 13, 2018,
underscored by upbeat electronic pulses, and the onlookers’ frowns gradually become smiles. They begin to dance and groove to the (diegetic? non-diegetic?) rhythm. Ferguson shoots the dance party unfolding in an impressively organic way. Trios and quartets of synchronized dancers seem to break away naturally in the crowd, and the other attendees cheer them on. André has his arm around a woman while he raps, and he waits on another drink at the bar. Later, he and Legend stand on top of the piano while they perform, which works great for framing the shot but would also be a realistic way to grab the attention of the party guests; they’re not just singing to you, the viewer, they’re singing to the people in their world. It’s a fantasy sequence, but it feels real, and more importantly, it feels fun.

_Figure 11.2: Solange in “Cranes in the Sky” (2016)._

Ferguson has also built lasting collaborative relationships, both with his wife Solange and with Janelle Monáe. Reflecting her gravitation towards the fine art world and indie music scenes, his collaborations with Solange often resemble gallery shows; “Cranes in the Sky” mimics a series of gorgeous photographic portraiture, as does the slightly more animated “Don’t Touch My Hair.” These are radical departures
from Ferguson’s usual oeuvre of capturing human joy in real time – *Vanity Fair* referred to the two works as “modern art in motion”\(^1\) – choosing instead to focus on the meditative and cerebral instead the momentary and visceral. His videos with Monáe range from a place of similar artificiality (the black-and-white-striped “Q.U.E.E.N.”) to more of his organic party sequences (the sorority throwdown of “Electric Lady”), but all of them are highly kinetic. Monáe, a disciple of Prince, loves to incorporate dancing, heightened expressions, and theatricality into all her work, and her videos are no exception.

By far, the collaboration that’s gotten the most attention is Monáe’s “Make Me Feel,” released in early 2018 to promote her upcoming album *Dirty Computer*; Monáe has implied that an hour-long feature film will accompany the LP, in the vein of *Lemonade*. Monáe, who refers to both the individual “Make Me Feel” video and the entire visual album project as an “emotion picture,”\(^2\) uses this particular work with Ferguson to take her rightful place on the throne left by Prince and exhume neon-fueled sexuality, in both an ‘80s nightclub and on a soundstage surrounded by dancers in rainbow tights. Ferguson makes both glittering sets look like real spaces, not green screens Monáe is dancing in front of; they are inhabited worlds that also reflect the pure joy inside Monáe’s head and her own version of freedom. As discussed earlier in the “Hotline Bling” chapter, “Make Me Feel” received considerable attention for its use of the so-called “bisexual lighting,” the blue-and-pink evocative lighting scheme that proliferates contemporary videos, as well as in a

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\(^2\) At the time of writing, *Dirty Computer* has yet to be released, but its accompanying “emotion picture” has been implied to be a visual album.
number of aesthetically adjacent films like *Atomic Blonde*. Though the phrase began as a meme and has been adopted half-jokingly by the online queer community, a number of professional critics have taken its presence in “Make Me Feel” as proof that Monáe is now outwardly embracing her identity.

> Figure 11.3: Janelle Monáe in “Make Me Feel” (2018).

But even without such symbolic lighting, I believe, the entire video points towards this message. It opens with her and Tessa Thompson – a love interest in the video and her rumored real-life girlfriend – emerging from the shadows in a nightclub. They walk through several multi-colored rooms, filled with Bowie impersonators, before coming across a room of women and femmes, where a blonde-wigged doppelgänger of Monáe sits on a futon. Static shots linger on posing patrons of the club, all dressed lavishly and expressing gender fluidity. As we see the original Monáe flirt with both Thompson and a man at the bar, we cut to the blonde Monáe, now on a rainbow set. She shimmies in sheer, rose-printed pants, crawls between the spandexed legs of her backup dancers and, in one suggestive moment, runs back and forth between a man and a woman in front of a pulsing, sherbet-colored backdrop, as though she can’t decide who she’s more attracted to. There’s the “real” Monáe coolly
flirting at the club, and then there’s the Monáe showing exactly how she feels internally, in abstract lighting, sets, and choreography. The duality works not only for conveying bisexual identity but self-discovery in general: the conflict and, hopefully, an eventual fusion between inward emotions and outward expression.

There’s one other emerging director whose subject is almost always this form of emotional liberation. Grant Singer, who began his music video career by directing surreal videos for local L.A. projects like Ariel Pink, recently released two pop videos that quietly expanded the limits of the genre’s visual representation. Lorde’s “Green Light” (2017) and Troye Sivan’s “My My My!” (2018) both feature their central artists dancing on their own, to paraphrase the Robyn song, but in very different contexts and purposes. In both, Singer uses the same techniques to capture exactly what each singer is trying to convey about his/her relationship, what aspects of their singing or gestures are diegetic vs. in their head, and what relationship they each have to the viewer.

“Green Light” is both the lead single and opener of Lorde’s Melodrama, originally conceived as a concept album told through a single house party. Melodrama didn’t go the full distance with that narrative – probably for the best – but it does center around The Party as a concept and as a central gravitational pull of one’s early 20s, particularly in the wake of a breakup. In a narrative context, “Green Light” the song begins just as Lorde’s long-term relationship with her boyfriend has ended, and she convinces herself to go out on the town to exorcise her woes, although not before catching her ex with a few jabs: “She thinks you love the beach, you’re such a damn liar.” “Green Light” the video begins in an appropriately confrontational
manner: Lorde addresses the camera directly, sporting a new, sleeker haircut than the trademark curly mane she wore during her early years of teenage fame. The dark blue sky of dusk glows behind her. “I do my makeup in somebody else’s car/We order different drinks at the same bars,” she tells us. Then she turns away and, shutting her eyes, sings, “I know about what you did and I wanna scream the truth.” Then, back to the camera: “She thinks you love the beach, you’re such a damn liar.” On “liar,” we cut to a different angle of Lorde, a side profile. She’s staring into a public bathroom mirror. Has she been speaking to her reflection this entire time? Has she been speaking out loud at all? Was she ever outside to begin with? It’s a jarring cut, one that forces us to reassess the conversational close-up that introduced the video. It would be like if “Nothing Compares 2 U” abruptly revealed that Sinéad O’Connor was speaking to her therapist the whole time.

*Figure 11.4: the first two shots of Lorde’s “Green Light” (2017).*
Throughout “Green Light,” Singer is careful when mixing this direct address, this soliloquy-like break from reality, with the livable world inside the video. Along with the bathroom scene, we see Lorde under the whirling lights of the club; in the backseat of a chauffeur SUV (and, later, dancing on top of it); and woozily making her way down a deserted LA sidewalk at night, holding a Walkman-like device connected to earbuds. For nearly all of these shots, Lorde doesn’t make eye contact with us; she either stares into the middle distance or is completely lost in her own headspace. When she does address the camera, it’s at particular moments of pointedness or intensity. There’s a suggestive glance at the line, “I whisper things, the city sings them back to you,” as though the lyrics themselves are transcending space and time to reach our ears. And during the second chorus, when the line “I’ll come get my things, but I can’t let go” switches to “I wish I could get my things and just let go,” she pauses her dancing at the club to practically shout the words into the camera lens. It’s as if we’re getting a glimpse into her mind, and that the version of herself we’re seeing onscreen is a heightened reality in which her thoughts and feelings are manifested in her physical movements and lipsyncing. The song, “Green Light,” represents her own inner monologue as she decides to go out and have fun – she’s not actually singing it to anyone but herself. She’s a kid staring out the car window as the radio plays her favorite song, or suddenly feeling a rush of emotion when a particular lyric blasts through her earbuds as she’s walking down the street.

My favorite details in the video are when Singer shows us this blend of reality and fiction: in the bathroom, shot through the mirror’s reflection, we see a group of women huddled together in the background, like you might see in any nightclub’s
ladies room on a Friday night. They pay no mind to Lorde singing her heart out to the mirror, suggesting that, to the girls, Lorde isn’t really singing at all – to them, she’s just a young woman in a pink dress, staring blankly at her reflection while washing her hands. We can infer, too, that when Lorde’s creative partner and producer, Jack Antonoff, shows up in the bathroom to play an upright piano, that he is also a figment of her own imagination. These moments mimic, in an extreme sense, the ways in which young people may look back on a night of drinking and debauchery, the mundane and the fantastic becoming indistinguishable from one another. Even as Lorde dramatically stomps and writhes on top of the parked SUV, her chauffeur vapes nonchalantly in the background.

For “My My My!” Singer uses another type of suggestive eye glance, one that might be used on a dance floor to get someone else’s attention. As Troye Sivan dances freely within an abandoned warehouse, close-ups of his side-eyes at the camera are intercut with shots of shirtless male models, looking back with curiosity and something a bit more lascivious. It’s an interesting subversion to the binary that videos had to adhere to during the MTV era: either be incredibly tame to get past the censors, or overtly explicit to provoke them. Frank Guan wrote of the video for “My My My!” in Vulture:

The relative chastity of the video, which shows off the bodies of gay men but never displays them in contact with each other, makes for an interesting contrast with Madonna’s ‘Justify My Love’ video, whose black-and-white cinematography it mimics. With its soft-core dynamics and light bondage themes, Madonna’s video was, like a lot of strong art in the ‘80s and ‘90s, thumbing its nose at religious conservatives; it was also about as close to porn as all but the most dedicated smut hounds were likely to get access to. Technology has changed the terms of access to erotic images; with the internet,
available to all, fairly drowning in porn, there’s no incentive for pop artists today to over-sexualize their videos. Furthermore, the theme of suggestion is especially loaded for a queer artist. For much of the 20th century, suggestion of attraction was all that gay people could express out in the open. For Sivan to bring the viewer into that world and have them be a participant is, in itself, a radical use of the medium. It’s an undeniably explicit form of queer sexuality without showing actual sex.

Figure 11.5: Troye Sivan in “My My My!” (2018).

Advancements in the music video form within the past five years have largely not been discussed in the context of music videos. Watching Lemonade, a visual album that Melina Matsoukas took part in, for the first time, I wondered if it would signal a new opportunity for artists – at least those with or near the level of Beyoncé’s fame – to create similar works. As I learned while researching this thesis, visual albums and short films based around music are not new phenomena; they go as far

back as 1979, when David Mallet directed a music video for each track of Blondie’s *Eat to the Beat*. This wasn’t even Beyoncé’s first visual LP – that would be her self-titled *Beyoncé*, from 2014, although it more closely resembled a collection of individual videos for each track than a complete film. Yet most music critics seem to not want to discuss or grapple with how a visual album affects one’s experience of listening to an LP, and film critics appear just as wary of discussing them in comparison to cinema.

In the 2010s, visual albums also signify a new partitioning in the video industry: the small acts and artists who have the means to shoot music videos on their iPhones and upload them to YouTube in the hopes that they’ll attract a following, and the superstars like Beyoncé who can afford to drop an entire LP and accompanying film, created by the best directors in the business, with next to no promotion.

Beyoncé, following in the tradition of pop stars who tightly control their own image, can use a visual album to make her message more explicit. *Lemonade* intersplices its tracks and segments with short snippets: sound collages that establish the atmosphere of a place, monologues written by the poet Warsan Shire and spoken by Beyoncé in voiceover. Visually depicting a wide array of black women onscreen – celebrities like Serena Williams and Zendaya together with the mothers of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown – sharpens the album’s narrative of black women standing together as a collective. Contrastingly, Frank Ocean’s *Endless*, released the same year, depicts the artist alone in a warehouse, building a staircase, for the entirety of the 45-minute runtime. Ocean is a perfectionist, and particularly wary of the public eye. Rather than showcasing himself out in public, Ocean is using the moving image to force the
viewer to associate *Endless* with his tireless workshopping. Writing for Pitchfork on both albums, in one of the only comprehensive pieces on visual albums as an art form, Judy Berman posits that “[t]he visual album is an accomplished work of cinema in its own right, but it’s also a work of criticism – an instructional manual for reading the music.”

How do we begin, then, to discuss the medium in a critical way? We can start by understanding its history, not just the fact that music videos used to be on MTV, but also who directed them, which stars saw a higher potential in their visual work, and what steps were taken to uplift what started out as a kind of promotional material into an art form. We can also be skeptical of claims that the medium is “dead” because it is no longer screened on television; the digital realm has allowed for more accessibility and innovation in music videos than ever before. Spike Jonze is still working in the form; he recently directed an ad for Apple HomePod, featuring the musician and dancer FKA twigs, that hardly feels like a commercial at all, with its impressively sprawling and modulating set pieces (no CGI needed) and empathetic depiction of its central character. Janelle Monáe has her own visual album – or “emotion picture,” as she calls it – coming out soon. Paul Thomas Anderson created his own version of “The Perfect Kiss,” when he filmed a one-take video of the band HAIM performing their song “Right Now” in the studio. Meanwhile, international video industries like K-pop videos are becoming mainstream thanks to the internet, cross-pollinating with influences from all over the world. Artists like Björk and Andrew Thomas Huang have even experimented with VR in their works. In the midst

of this proliferation, we can examine how each video functions to move and inspire us, and how each work fits into the ever-growing digital landscape.

Figure 11.6: FKA twigs in the Spike Jonze-directed ad for Apple HomePod (2018).

The video directors who have emerged in the 2010s have all had their styles shaped dramatically by the internet, by social mores, and by the contemporary ways in which we consume pop culture. Being an inherently referential medium, music videos have to invoke all of these outside influences while staying true to the individual styles of their central musicians and directors, as well as whatever happens in the fusion of those creative energies. It’s a massive undertaking for a short visual form, yet watching these new videos brings me nothing but joy and excitement. To watch videos like “We Found Love” or “Don’t Touch My Hair” or “My My My!” or *Lemonade* is to know that the medium is not dead. All you have to do is look.
Filmography/Videography

Music Videos (including Musical Short Films and Visual Albums)


Lamar, Kendrick, “King Kunta.” Directed by Director X and The Little Homies. 2015.

Lamar, Kendrick, “These Walls.” Directed by Colin Tilley and The Little Homies. 2015.


Michael, George, “Careless Whisper.” Directed by Duncan Gibbins and Andy Morahan. 1984


OK Go, “Here It Goes Again.” Directed by Trish Sie and OK Go. 2006.


**Narrative Films and Shorts**


Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. Directed by Howard Hawks. 20th Century Fox, 1953.


The Hunger Games (franchise)


Street of Crocodiles. Directed by Brothers Quay. 1986.


Television

America’s Funniest Home Videos. Created by Vin Di Bona. ABC, 1990-present.


The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air. Created by Andy Borowitz and Susan Borowitz. NBC, 1990-1996.


The Office. Created by Greg Daniels. NBC, 2005-2013.


Riverdale. Created by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa. The CW, 2017-present.


Saturday Night Live. Created by Lorne Michaels. NBC, 1975-present.


Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? Created by David Briggs, Steven Knight, Mike Whitehill. Sony Picture Television, 1998-present.

Other Videos


Bibliography


