Music Video and YouTube: New Aesthetics and Generic Transformations

Case Study— Beyoncé’s and Lady Gaga’s Video Phone

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Not much is left of the music video industry. Profits have fallen, budgets have been slashed and fewer videos are being made. Videos today can look like they’re aping devices of the 80s, as if what we saw then wasn’t reflective of musical styles or a zeitgeist but rather economics.  

While it has always been difficult to make a living directing music video, now even the top directors tend to say, “I’m going on vacation - I’m going to direct a music video” because they don’t get paid for what they do.

I’m hopeful, however. Artists and technicians within other genres and media are laboring under similar constraints (The NY Times recently cut 10% of its staff and shut down foreign bureaus: yet within a year the company predicts an uptick).  

Music video has always been mutable. I think it will survive this transition. Perhaps also, this moment presents an opportunity. If we listen carefully and attend patiently, we’ll learn new things about the possibilities of the form.

I’ve claimed that music video is strange and getting stranger (Vernallis 2004: p. 6). Perusing the internet produces unusual experiences: as we come across videos set adrift between election news clips, exhortations about how to keep your mate sexually engaged, and the newest fad diets; or click among streams of text, snapshots, and other YouTube links, music videos can now become the anchor rather than the source of discontinuity. Has the form of music video become the supertext? Music video’s elongations and instances of condensation, its alternating thicket and wide-open spaces map onto the web’s larger structures. Do the web’s simultaneous windows and jumpy advertising also shape music video aesthetics? On a webpage, music videos compete with lurid pop-up ads and other scrolling devices. So why do the song and image project further than they ever did? The videos themselves still want to claim a liberatory otherness: “I kissed a girl and I liked it.”
Does music video’s true home now reside elsewhere—in the film trailer, the mashup, the wedding video, the visual arts flash project, the DIY (do it yourself) aesthetic? Does this mean the genre has new means of realizing itself? We might first ask what music video is today. Older definitions don’t seem to work. In the 80s and 90s people knew what a music video was—a song set to memorable imagery, paid for by the record company to promote the song or musicians, and screened on cable. Now, however, with YouTube’s cornucopia of clips, DIY aesthetics, and new digital cinema’s musical segments, the boundaries have been blurred. In *Auto-Tune the News*, newscasters with their voices processed through Auto-Tune “sing” their stories accompanied by tracks built in Fruity Loops, an inexpensive music-production program.\(^5\) While some elements suggest prior understanding of the music video, others don’t, as the experience leans close to watching news footage with a musical twist. Music videos have always blended genres, incorporated other media, and adopted experimental techniques, but now indicators of production, reception, and intent go missing. While commonsense definitions of “music video” no longer hold, no other term has taken its place. I’ll often describe short clips with lively audiovisual soundtracks and rich audiovisual relations as music videos or their siblings.

Given the number and variety of clips on YouTube, it’s hard to draw a border between what is and isn’t a music video. Clips I would once have considered as belonging primarily to another genre, perhaps because they appeal to different constituencies or foreground different techniques, now seem to belong firmly within the music video canon. Two examples: *The Badger Song* and *The Duck Song* most resemble children’s cartoons.\(^6\) Yet many music videos today use just as inexpensive and schematic animation, because it’s easy to do and projects well on the web (the music video, directed by Hype Williams in 2008 for Kanye West’s *Heartless* with its simple, block-like forms, achieved via the rotoscoping animation technique, seems to reference these). *The Duck Song*, a somewhat sophisticated tune with more than a wink at *Sesame Street*, is performed by an adult singer-songwriter on the guitar. Who am I to say this is a children’s cartoon? My students listen to *The Duck Song* as much as anything else, and singer-songwriter Bryant Oden also sells his tune on the Internet.\(^7\) The clip *Haha Baby* can be experienced as a music video—the father’s and child’s laugh becomes a singable melody.\(^5\) Short-form clips with striking musical accompaniment, like *Kung Fu Baby*, and *Dramatic Chipmunk*, strike me as music videos, even more so than *The Duck Song*.\(^9\) *Evolution of Dance* and *Charlie Bit My Finger*,\(^10\) at first glance seem outside of the genre, but once they’ve been remixed through fruity loops, they begin to work like music videos.\(^3\)

In this article, I won’t be able to define all the generic features of today’s music video, but I’ll make a first foray in that direction, arguing that clips on YouTube now reflect an aesthetic different from those of earlier genres on television or cable. We can begin to understand music video
as a part of a new mode and platform if we identify the aesthetic features that define YouTube: 1) reiteration and pulse; 2) irreality and weightlessness (tied to low-resolution and the digital); 3) scale and graphic values; 4) unusual causal relations; 5) parametric volubility and intertextuality; 6) sardonic humor and parody; 7) condensation; and 8) formal replication of the web. I’ll apply these YouTube-oriented features to a music video most viewers would identify as belonging to the genre (here, a performance set against a pre-recorded song, released by a major record company, and designed to draw attention to the song and sell it). This process should help us identify the ways music video is changing and the ways YouTube reflects a new mode and platform. My case study will be the recent video by Hype William for Beyoncé’s and Lady Gaga’s song *Video Phone*, shot in October 2009.

But what is YouTube? How we might think about it? Music video is making a strong global comeback because of YouTube. The number of clips on the site stretches to the sublime – YouTube streams 1.2 billion videos a day, enough for every person on the planet with internet to watch a clip each day (Arrington 2009). As the site’s number one streamed content, music video consumption is dramatically up. It’s the perfect form to quickly set the pulse of our daily lives, as well as grab a moment’s respite while websurfing or engaging in repetitive work. We may even look to music video clips on YouTube to match the pulse of today’s world: perhaps in our heteroglot, diversified, but linked environment, we hope music video clips will help world citizens find a shared rhythm. YouTube and music video raises many questions, more than this article can address. These include new forms of attention; cross-cultural exchange; shifting ideological content; changed professions and forms of participation for industry personnel, media makers, musicians, and audiences; budget, bandwidth and screen size; and so on.

Scholars have presented viewpoints on YouTube, but these still map but a glimmer of what YouTube is. Alex Juhasz describes it as a space for crass commercialism and further reification of mainstream media. For her, YouTube fails to build communities (Juhasz 2009). Michael Wetsch, on the other hand, writes on how much YouTube fosters community and acts as an agent for self-expression: the site makes possible new identities, sexualities, and modes of interaction (Wetsch/Heffernan 2008). Virginia Heffernan could be considered a connoisseur who classifies clips as high-art and elite, the indie, quirky, and the outsider (Wetsch/Heffernan 2008). These authors, I feel, have been the best at mapping YouTube’s landscape. Since YouTube remains open territory, some of YouTube’s aesthetic features (listed above) are a place to begin. Any clip may embody some of these features, though not all. Sometimes a YouTube clip can seem to possess many of the elements commonly present in music video, though in a recent music video clip or a YouTube clip these can appear even more distorted and strange. As we’ll see, this is strikingly so for Hype William’s video for *Video Phone*, by Beyoncé and Lady Gaga.
1. REITERATION AND PULSE

The new prosumer YouTube aesthetic often emphasizes insistent reiteration (forms like AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA, or variants, AAABAAAB-CAAAA are good examples.) Many YouTube genres have taken up an obsessive pulse. Crazy or overly anthropomorphized animals as in Sneezing Baby Panda, Gizmo Flushes, and others, show animals acting repetitively in videos sometimes punctuated by a sudden departure from the pattern. The homemade documentaries with personal testimonials linked one after another often lead to something even more repetitive: people make compilation clips with the best smiling faces or the funniest falls out of chairs. Mashups are built up through videos spliced together, anywhere from two clips to hundreds. Clips start forming a regular progression. A march-like obsession and equal opportunity take hold. Reiteration in political viral web media occurs in clips like APT Obama Obama, where Obama’s name is sung over and over again. Barack Obollywood, an homage to Bollywood, reiterates the word “acha” as the imagery disperses into kaleidoscopic replication. Straight ahead music videos also have been taken over by an insistent pulse. El Sonidito is one of the most marked examples—others include Chacarron Macarron and Sunday Afternoon. Why would reiteration be such a predominant feature of today’s media? Let me give several reasons tied to production practices, contemporary labor conditions, and aesthetics.

The production practices of YouTube—including the DIY aesthetic—exert a strong influence. Fans with no training want to make something. With favorite materials—things to be deformed and reconfigured anew—they start projects but they may not know how to put materials together. Cultural forms like the pop song are products that have been studied and taught. In contrast, today’s makers eschew these constructs, instead jumping in with their editing software and just get going. In the midst of alternating their materials, a realization dawns near the two-minute mark that they’d prefer to make something resembling a pop song and they peter out. Professional makers with more training may pick up on the style, even if it’s primitive, because it seems like the next big thing. Such processes seep in, sometimes on a subterranean level, transforming culture on a global scale.

Reiteration also suits our time—YouTube clips project what we are and where we may be heading. The pace and demands of business and leisure time have been accelerating and the number of inputs continue to proliferate. Experiences are based on quick, overlapping hookups: the e-mail to which we must respond, the cell phone text message calling for an answer, the tweet that demands immediate attention, the voice of the person next to you, the song coming up on the iPod, the slot you occupy in the queue for the IVR phone bank. As a shot of repetition, YouTube works like a tonic. Jammed into that space for a minute, sped up and locked into
a jackhammer mode, the web surfer, suddenly released back into the everyday media sphere, experiences wide open spaces.18

Competition among media also encourages obsessive repetition. YouTube’s response to the hyperintensified-CGI laden-blockbuster seeking-new digital cinema and to video games may reveal a sharp competitiveness. The nagging quality may not only pull viewers away from other YouTube clips and more distant websites but also away from all external screens. One sort of reiterative form is a psychedelic, mind-twisting approach. These clips may provide a low-fi, low-cost blockbuster experience in miniature.19

Reiteration has an aesthetic function as well. The marks surrounding the YouTube clip and the frames strewn across the computer monitor can create a sense of baroque obsessiveness. YouTube links must respond to everything on the page: all the tiny graphs and signs repetitively laid out, and everything else on the monitor’s screen. Together these establish a cluttered field from within which the clip must seize attention. Reiteration has also to do with consumption compulsion. When the mega popular YouTube Shoes’ lead singer, dressed in drag, sings “Shoes” in the most affectless style possible, over and over, s/he suggests that repetition is tied to the impulse to buy, buy, consume, consume, start over.20 Yet as Gilles Deleuze would argue, with the Darwinian turn can come a slight difference (Deleuze 1995: p. 75). YouTube clips can mysteriously trip themselves into another place—frequently darker. In Shoes we start from a suburban family zoned out on couches as if they’re on ‘luudes, to finally a frenzied rave. Perhaps the reiterating word “shoes” has raised the family’s level of delirium.

Repetition may reflect sociocultural changes. Howard Hawks’s 30s screwball comedies were popular in an era when the popular press and other sociocultural forces encouraged couples to become help- and friends-mates. Today’s repetition may help with the cultural disruptions many of us experience as we switch jobs from city to city, and become unmoored from friends and family. Similarly, childhood memories like those of coping with a steady stream of legal and biological parents may have a chance to be revealed and tamed. These forms of repetition are often accompanied with lost objects or surrealism. Clips like Dan Deacon’s & Liam Lynch’s Drinking Out of Cups seem to have the sense that a moment might be dislodged and held. If we control repetition we can insulate ourselves a little from outside forces. Drug culture may play a role too. The new drugs, like Adderall, Ritalin and Focalin, help us exceed at repetitive, slightly odious tasks. YouTube’s reiterative 1’s (their consistent, unremitting pulse) sync with our drug-influenced rhythms.
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Pop music has always employed techniques of reiteration. But something is different now. Many bloggers and journalists have noted that Beyoncé’s most recent songs contain earworms—Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It) seems to get lodged in people’s brains and won’t let go. Video Phone sounds like a one-off of Single Ladies. Perhaps simple phrases like “put a ring on it” and “video phone” repeated over and over, embedded in an overdubbed, chattering chorus of real and synthesized voices, help drive the sound into the brain (the sounds both ring and reverberate, suggesting obsessive demands for action.) In these videos, Beyoncé’s hips circling around and around alongside the musical hook reinforces the pattern. Other sources of repetition: Lady Gaga’s songs, no matter how well crafted, are close siblings of one another (arrangement and presentation diverge little). Due to Gaga’s predictable musical voice, simply her appearance in Video Phone reinforces a sense of repetition. The Video Phone song proper also contains much repetition. (In the upper registers, a synthesizer patch spends most of its time cycling among a few pitches, for example.)

Many elements in Video Phone’s imagery feature reiteration. The opening, strobing overlays as a Reservoir Dogs-like bevvy of men and Beyoncé strut past lonely warehouses (fig. 1), suggest instability. Once the video starts proper, the first series of Beyoncé’s multiplying are formed through two types of visual imagery 1) echoed grayed-out heads filling out the left- and right-hand sides of the frame (as if they were scroll bars for videogames: fig. 2), with these gray heads beginning to multiply and 2) Beyoncé’s dancing in the center of the frame with echoed, streaming images trailing after her. Together these suggest an infinite regress. Cameramen with their camera heads also begin to reproduce (fig. 3).

Figs. 1-3: Stills from the music video by Hype Williams: Beyoncé ft. Lady Gaga, Telephone, 2009
Beyoncé and Gaga, as women lined up in chairs, become exchangeable, rotatable. Visually this video suggests 80s music-video aesthetics, with its constant deployment of different dresses, set-ups, and color backgrounds (the videos for Whitney Houston’s *I Wanna Dance with Somebody*, directed in 1985 by Brian Grant, and for Neneh Cherry’s *Buffalo Stance*, directed in 1989 by John Maybury, are touchstones.) But this video seems more adept and concerted in its effects. The set-ups feel reiterative. Though there is some cross-bleeding, the basic pattern is one after another in a series, with the series becoming more important than teleological drive. But here the reiteration is able to carry us into new realms. More is at stake: sex for profit, pleasure, acceptance, power, or war.

On YouTube, repetition is often combined with boredom and tedium. Repetition, of course, can also be paired with a kind of jacked-up, unrelenting excitement, like the songs of Katie Perry, but *Video Phone* is a case of the former. The finger snaps are desultory, often lagging behind the beat. The synthesizer patch in the upper register conveys ennui, and the exotic melody in the mid-range sounds like an inexpensive 8-bit Casio sound from the mid 80’s—thin and tinny. The drums in the rhythm section seem cheap—sometimes sounding like the banging on trash can lids, and sometimes like the tapping on heavy plastic. This arrangement does not suggest money or luxury—there are no live strings, for example. “Watch me on your video phone” sounds like a corporate slogan we’re consigned to hear over and over.
2. Digital Swerve – Irreality and Weightlessness

The digital itself produces an intensified audiovisual aesthetic—its both buzziness and weightlessness. Even though, as Lev Manovich argues, film possesses some digital features—the single frames (all 1’s), the film projector’s beam of light as it flashes on and off (0, 1’s), and celluloid’s succession (more 0’s and 1’s)—for many theorists, it remains distinct from digital media (Manovich 2001: p. XV, 20). André Bazin, for example, argued strongly for celluloid’s analog component (Bazin 2004: p. 96-97). Film functions as a mask of the world, an analog, a replica; light falling on the randomly placed silver halides leave a mark or trace, something directly from the world remains on the film. Extending Bazin’s argument, Laura Mulvey claims that film possesses contradictory pulls that shadow our own biological processes (Mulvey 2006: p. 17-33). One of cinema’s aspects is teleologically driven, an Eros. The motoric film projector (and the camera as it records) drives forward, it purrs. The frame’s constant passing, filled with changing configurations that press forward and away, resembles our own life drives for power, sex, reproduction. Cinema’s motoric nature is also why we see so often literalized, trains, cars, people running, people walking. Yet half of the film is comprised of stillness—a black, a darkness that occurs in the transition from frame to frame. Cinema itself, replicating so many of our beloved narrative forms, has a teleological drive—just as much toward eros and power as toward a death-drive, a willingness to embrace cessation.

But the digital possesses different properties, as David Rodowick argues (Rodowick 2007: p. 93-99, 163). The digital is a transcriptive, rather than an analog process. Think first of a grid, a fine tic-tac-toe lattice, and within each block resides a pixel that flips on and off within its slot. The grid remains constant even as the pixels switch. Our experience is that of the grid’s continuous burn, and the weightless fluctuations of pixels blinking on and off. The electronic light continually oscillates, appearing and vanishing, yet never completely rests. One way to give this digital weightlessness, life, is through phantasmagorically embodying it, making it musical. The digital music in tandem with the digital image creates a monstrously hybrid automaton. This phantasm is literalized in Hellboy 2: The Golden Army (2008, Guillermo del Toro): here the Green Monster that terrorizes the city, once shot down, becomes flowers’ spores and green goo rolling and drifting away—nothing but dreams and nearly substanceless puff and stuff. Similarly, Hellboy 2’s clunky robots crumble like wet merinques as soon as the switch is flipped off. In The Day of the Earth Stood Still (2008, Scott Derrickson) the globe and locusts seem comprised of gossamer. In Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen (2009, Michael Bay), metal machine monsters melt into ball bearings or turn into filament-dust. In Speed Racer (2008, Andy and Lana Wachowski) cars careening into each other sometimes go right through another as if they were ghosts. The digital images’ swerve or momentum calls for a shadow schema, a filling in.
As Lawrence Sterne claims, the soundtrack is digital as well—we might say we have digital on digital—but perceptually the soundtrack provides a more continuous function, more closely aligned to our analog experiences (digital sound samples from both the top and the bottom of the wave form, creating a stronger illusion of continuity).

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A lo-res aesthetic hovers over the video. The grayed-out images of Beyoncé's head against the more luridly colored ones remind us that we might be, or ought to be, watching on a video phone. Flickering images in the video's opening as well as its first verse (here the lyrics state: “cologne in the air”) destabilize the video. The materials of *Video Phone*—plastic, lycra, and tiger prints—seem cheap, as do the more working-class, Wal-Mart, mass-marketed colors. These visual touches raise questions about whether we can receive pleasure from mainstream, commercial products. Props and costumes might look tossed together; the blue hooded mask and pink jacket suggest an unreality. Beyoncé’s occasional harder chest thrusts, hip bumps, and knee bends seem like an attempt to lock the video down, to stop it from floating free.

### 3. SCALE AND GRAPHIC VALUES

YouTube's aesthetic values include bold or strongly projected graphic design and well-judged scale. This may be related to the medium and its mode of delivery—a clip's limited length, its level of resolution, and the forms of attention it encourages. Small environments with low quality audiovisuals may tend toward a fuzziness or an ungroundedness that encourages makers, viewers, and consumers to seek stronger definition. YouTube clips must often garner attention in a competitive environment; many struggle to gain legibility.

What makes a successful YouTube clip? If we can imagine the forms traced as a cartoon—crudely outlined and colored in very simply—and it still speaks, my bet is it has a better shot at success. *Panda sneezes, Haha baby* and *Evolution of Dance* would all make popular cartoons. Of course these already have cartoon remakes yet they lack the same charm (and view counts), perhaps because their shape, color, movement, and proportion don't fall into exactly the right ratio. “Best of YouTube” clip homages with celebrity medleys like Weezer's music video *Pork and Beans* or South Park’s cartoon skit seemingly convey little of what’s magical, charismatic or wonderful about the top-ranked YouTube clips.

YouTube clips tend to feature simplistic and evocative representations of the body and shape—either as face, body part or body whole. Clearly legible objects trigger rich affective responses, and help quickly give the performer a pseudo-context—(chairs, cups). Contrasting textures—the
shiny and the dull; the smooth, brittle and rough—also help clips come forward. Color schemes differ from television. There might be an array of unified tones, the blues in *Laughing Baby*, the muted greens in *Numa Numa*; these clips might also be luridly pastel or monochrome, but whatever color scheme, there is less room for the widely various, free or ad-hoc. Space contracts. While long-form media take us in and out of corridors, alleys, countrysides and intimate spaces, YouTube sticks to single frontal views (the differences in art and design between CD covers and album covers mirrors YouTube clips in relation to television—both YouTube clips and CD covers tend to project reduced, telescoped information).

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Since the early 90’s, one strand in Hype Williams’s oeuvre has been minimalist. He’s often worked with simple set-ups such as a few performers before a blank cyclorama. Nevertheless, his earlier videos were different: the men and women came up to and backed away from the lens; figures in the background established a dense interplay with those in the foreground. The Beyoncé video is all frontal—all direct address. The video seems to be a primer on how to do frontality (you can pan up the body. Place two heads on the side. Shoot a composition with ¾ of the body. Use a close-up on the eyes. Create a tableau of three figures, and so on). Details are blunt: chairs, guns, a large bulls-eye. Costuming works emblematically to trigger fast associations—all details perform work (Beyoncé’s red pumps have little bows on them – Gaga’s yellow pumps don’t). Yet subtlety is also important, at least on one register. The shapes of shadows shift from shot to shot—circular, ribbed and curved, boxy, or sweeping down from the top of the frame.

### 4. Causal Relations

Music video can raise questions of cause and effect, foregrounding relations so ambiguous that the music seems to be the engine mobilizing people, objects and environments (Vernallis 2004: p. 6). Yet YouTube clips raise questions of cause and effect even more sharply than do music videos—one sometimes wonders if this is the primary hook energizing the clip. A quick glance at the most popular YouTube clips bears this out. In *Panda’s Sneeze*, did we know a panda could sneeze? And so hard that it would blow away both mother and baby? What animates that dancer in *Evolution of Dance*? Mexican jumping beans? Perhaps some wiry worms wiggling inside him, or mysterious powers rippling throughout his limbs? Why would the little boy in the car’s backseat be so punch drunk, as if a parent had possibly malevolently slipped him a mickey? One might argue that many media in their infancy focused on mysterious relations of cause and effect. Since YouTube is just getting started, its develop-
ment might trace its sibling’s, the cinema’s, first steps, which began with a “cinema of attractions”; here, a fascination with the basic mechanics of things like the Lumiere’s earliest film strips with a train coming into town; Thomas Alva Edison’s Mr. Ott’s Sneeze; Georges Méliès’s figures popping in and out alongside puffs of smoke (Gunning 1989). Music video first featured male musicians who terrorized women alongside awkward animation that made things appear and disappear (like the video for The Cars’ You Might Think, directed in 1984 by Jeff Stein & Alex Weil).

David Rodowick provides a reason for the emphasis on causal relations (Rodowick 2007: p. 151). Our experiences of screens have changed with the computer’s multiple windows we can activate, click through, resize, move and hide. In video games, too, we enact spatial transformations of the environment within the frame. The ways our gestures transform coordinates as we surf through the web, and participate in the game experience, might, through contagion, be transferred to YouTube. Though we cannot truly modify the inner workings of a clip, the top all time YouTube clips seem intensely bound up with powerful, obscure causal relations that are in play. We have the illusion that we might control these at a meta-level.

The scale of YouTube clips contributes to our sense of power. Make McCain Interesting and Yes We Can have small dimensions that create an illusion of our authority over annoying or overly dependent characters (we can snub them out in an instant).28 Chris Cocker of Leave Britney Alone, Fred Figglehorn, of Fred Loses His Meds and Gary Brolsma of Numa Numa may be tolerable in miniature, but they’d be unbearable on television.29 The clips wouldn’t have as much charm if they were closer to our size.

Chocolate Rain is a music video that emphasizes causal relations and fits the scale of YouTube. In this video, singer Tay Zonday leans back from the mic.30 Zonday must have found this gesture so baffled viewers that he needed to add a clunky kyron-text generated disclaimer: “I step away because…” A mystery remains, especially since the recording equipment remains off-screen. How does this shape our experience of the music and understanding of its sources? (Imagine if we saw Zonday at the mixing board. How much allure would that have?) The adult voice in a young person’s body adds to the enigma. And the screen’s yellow tint? Does it speak with the lyrics? Does Chocolate Rain become golden? Occasional synth attacks in the upper register might suggest the beginning of falling rain. The lyrics have an apocalyptic bent—perhaps Zonday is an emissary from the future. Chocolate Rain is powerful because it elicits so many responses—awe, envy, affection.

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Beyoncé immediately raises questions about power and control: “Can you handle this?” or “Do you dare watch me?” Are we playing her, or is she playing us? Is she on our phone? Why would a miniature version of Beyoncé, as experienced on YouTube or a cell phone, be more threatening
than if she were on cable TV? (Madonna’s *Human Nature* and *Open Your Heart* both directed by Jean-Baptiste Mondino in 1995 respectively 1986 have nothing on this.)31 Inexplicably sometimes the guns go off and sometimes they don’t. We hear sounds that suggest orgasm, but can’t be sure. What are the triggers that push Beyoncé into a sexual state? Is her path always the same to orgasm? Does she need us at all? What if we could random access this music video? Would we have a better experience?

And is Beyoncé more of a top or bottom? She appears to have power here. Chewing gum, she’s the bored, jaded sex-worker. But we can’t quite gauge her actions—if she wants to, she might walk away. Gaga’s relation to Beyoncé is unclear. Are they colleagues sharing a medley or competitors for fame, money, or sexual favors? (Gaga is performing too hard to chew gum.) Perhaps most uncanny are the soundtrack’s voices. We hear women’s moans throughout, but it’s not always clear to whom they belong. Are two Beyoncés pleasuring themselves? Is it Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, or backing-track singers who moan increasingly as the song progresses? What is the status of the child-like robo-voice saying “You wanna video me?”

### 5. Parametric Volubility and Intertextuality

On all fronts YouTube is loquacious. Avid YouTube users are well familiar with the endless riffs on popular clips (these often overwhelm the original, making it near impossible to locate a sought-after clip). Intertextuality and hybridization occur across platforms, among users, and within clips. Let me show the ways YouTube’s loquaciousness functions internally within a clip, fracturing its contents even more than music video ever did; while music video often showcased a moment-by-moment shifting aesthetic, YouTube cranks the volubility up a notch. One musical genre on YouTube simply multiplies: performance occurs within multiple frames within the clip, or a figure is multiply duplicated (*Enter Kazoo Man: Metallica Enter Sandman* and *Michael Jackson Medley* are good examples).32 I predict we’ll see these layering practices proliferating. We can look to film trailers first. For example, the film trailer for *The Spirit* (2008, Frank Miller) possesses key features of the new audiovisual aesthetics. Hyper-stylized, it follows a series of affective flashpoints, nimbly crossing media. (Alfred Hitchcock quipped that film was like life with all the boring bits cut out: he wanted to play audiences like an orchestra, propelling them along the paths of his moods. *The Spirit* approaches the segment Hitchcock dreamed of.) An animated line comes into focus and the sound before the drawing helps us identify it as a heart monitor’s flatline. The music and animated line swell and generate a tree turning into birds taking flight. Something streams with a whoosh across the frame. We follow it as it becomes a figure leaping off a building. The words “Silken Floss” impress themselves on the frame—the inky blacks, firehouse reds and strongly bolded text suggest S & M. We might feel as if we were like a stone skipping across the water.
The movement across medial surfaces makes it seem as if we’re the hot potato. Intermediality can create an experience in which we shift our attention so rapidly among media that our experience is of only touching surfaces, never ground.

Trailers are a great form of parametric volubility, especially blockbuster film trailers. *The Transformers* trailer keeps us busy. We hear a sound, our attention turns toward it, something leaps across the frame, we follow it, and then another sound fills in what we heard. But our attention is already elsewhere. Trailers of this sort, including the one for *Miami Vice* (2006, Michael Mann), often become full-fledged music videos toward the end (they tend to open with enigmatic sounds of machine noises, heart beats, or suggestions of drumming, and two-thirds in work themselves into pop songs). Perhaps because YouTube is small and often made by prosumers without advanced skills, cross-mediality is not the most emphasized of techniques. But I’d argue it may be the wave of the future that will soon infiltrate all genres. *Barack Obollywood*, a 2008 presidential campaign clip, and the opening of LL Cool J (ft. Wyclef Jean)’s *Mr. President* music video showcase this style.33

Mashups form a subset of the new intermediality. In a mashup, the edited shots and sounds of a performer can hang as fragments. Other materials sweep past, but the musical hook or image lingers like a pungent smell. If you needed to pare down and carry forward an animal presence of your beloved performer, this would be it. Often one medium seems to retain its liveliness—a song lyric, the body moving, a musical hook, the other freezes in mechanical repetitions. The live bit pulls apart from a wash of other material pressing through. Any moment can teeter toward something revelatory or lost. A mashup can be unpredictable. On YouTube there are thousands of mashups including ones for the pop songs of the year as well as for the 2008 campaign.34 Prosumer work is growing exponentially—in the future there will be more.

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Mashups too may have influenced *Video Phone*. One of YouTube’s most popular mashups, *Tic Toxic*, features rapid cutting between Gwen Stefani and Britney Spears, each shot first establishing, and then giving ground to the second performer.35 The clip’s rapid change in mood or tone may have been picked up by *Video Phone*.

As mentioned, volubility and intertextuality occurs across all fronts. *Video Phone* takes place within many forms of conversation. This is the first video Hype Williams made with Beyoncé after the 2009 Grammy Awards, when Kanye West interrupted Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech for “Best Female Video of the Year” by shouting that Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time. Within a few days, President Obama, off-mic, called West a “jackass.” The tapes were distributed widely through media outlets. Hype Williams may have felt a special pressure to stand by Be-
yoncé and make the “mother” of all videos, extending the range of people and places she might represent. At the same time as Video Phone, Lady Gaga’s Paparazzi and Bad Romance were in play. The immensely popular Gaga/Beyoncé Telephone (directed by Jonas Åkerlund) soon followed, with a promise to serialize these events. In Telephone, we might imagine Gaga’s serving prison time for all of her “bad” deeds like sex trading with Beyoncé in Video Phone; poisoning her lover in Paparazzi (directed in 2009 also by Åkerlund); selling herself and then killing her trick in Bad Romance (directed in 2009 by Francis Lawrence: as Beyoncé in Telephone notes, she’s “been a bad, bad girl.”) Similarly the man played by rapper Tyrese may be poisoned in Telephone for responding inappropriately to Video Phone’s women. Video Phone and Telephone share many aesthetics including a sonic low eight-bit rate; collaborative or competitive dancing (my students claim Beyoncé was not allowed to dance in Telephone so Gaga could shine); and a visual and aural stuttering and breaking up of sound and visual imagery. Video Phone is just as intertextual as Telephone.6

6. SARDONIC HUMOR AND PARODY

Parody permeates the web. Examples include the legions of versions of Single Ladies and the remakes of political ads like john.he.is and Raisin’ McCain.37 The aesthetic has so suffused web production, one could easily devote a chapter just to this topic.38 Parody may be so prevalent today because so many untrained producers are participating in the art form—an event never occurring to such a great extent in history. I imagine many YouTube users are like college students enrolled in their first production class.39 DIYers embrace compositional strategies that are easy to implement. You take the commercial or the television skit and you redo it: you can restage it or remix it—easy approaches include intercutting two or more clips and adding or deleting layers. In the anonymity of the web, YouTube makers are in search of a ground—your sarcastic take immediately places you in relation to a select group of viewers as well as the producers and fans of the original material. Your parody, now tied to original content, piggybacks on an already accrued attention (Sconce 2002). Sarcasm also pierces us. Anything that pushes against social norms tends to grab attention.

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Since any clip might be parodied, remixed, or just made to look generally stupid, many YouTube clips adopt a sarcastic, snide, knowing stance. Video Phone works this way. You might attempt a campy remake with young, plump, college-bound males, but the video has already anticipated that. It’s already envisioned all the permutations. Already, there are spoofs and parodies of Video Phone on the web. It’s something two or more boys or girls can do in their bedrooms. Props are easy to make. Do you have some
sheets and several pairs of tights? Some wigs might help. Telephone’s funny gowns made of unhemmed swatches of cloth pay homage to this.

7. Condensation

YouTube clips that have garnered over a million hits elicit unconscious desires and wishes in the deepest Freudian sense. YouTube is full of puns, jokes and returns to childhood. In Numa Numa a subtle allusion here to Humpty Dumpty is going on. Gary Brolsma’s singing karaoke alongside a high, male but feminine-sounding falsetto pushes what’s unfolding into a state of delirium. His facial gestures are so quick and malleable he becomes a Disney animation (watch: he’s good with choreography for the camera, judiciously moving back from and toward the camera’s lens in relation to the music. He’s expert at navigating the small space he’s been given). The fact that the clip conjures forth childhood fantasies, along with more adult anxieties concerning control and sexual desire, and that we sense we can click away from the clip and remove his audience, makes it overwhelmingly attractive.

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To give a sense of the ways condensation works in Video Phone, let me provide a more extended analysis of the clip, focusing on the social issues and psychic material called forth in this clip. Music video has always worked with condensation and a plurality of meaning, but Video Phone seems like a departure from the past, with its reduced materials and complex signifiers that fail to add up. If we take seriously the video’s multitude of visual and aural signs, Hype Williams, Beyoncé and Lady Gaga seem remarkably expansive, willing to take over vast swatches of global and national discourse. One of two trajectories for Video Phone may not be progressive. In the clip, Beyoncé becomes our new Betty Page, our all-around, American pin-up girl for the troops in Afghanistan and Iraq (fig. 4). Her power and beauty can transsubstantiate our guilt over Abu Ghraib. Cameramen shoot her buttocks, and then she threatens men who are hooded and bound (fig. 5). We take the pictures on our cell phone. Yet her roles as B-girl and shy pin-up along with the semiotics of her costume—an oversized t-shirt embossed with an alien’s head drawn in third world colors, sporting the word “peace,” a jaunty beret and both male and female gender-symbol earrings—provide a more hopeful second trajectory (fig. 6). The video’s color palette—moving through a trajectory from red and black to deep pink, blue and gray, pastel colors of baby pink, blue and yellow to third-world (possibly Jamaican) colors of orange, green, red and black, as well as the rising sun emblem of WWII Japan, point to a transnational, third world, perhaps more politically progressive and inclusive politics.
A history of popular culture and performance, including African American culture, is also encapsulated. Beyoncé’s first dance is a direct homage to Josephine Baker. Beyoncé’s movements, long waving braid and flared miniskirt are a few references (one might be tempted to expand the exotic elements, adding drum beats, palm trees, and dinosaur bones). Howard Hawk’s film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) is also referenced through Beyoncé’s and Gaga’s costumes of long satin gloves and dress, the performers’ carefully choreographed work with chairs, and Beyoncé’s readjusting of her breasts and bra. Many odd elements which might seem like loose ends appear too—early-80s album covers by Roxy Music and The Residents, 1980s big-shouldered military-style fashion, the work of Robert Mapplethorpe and Kenneth Anger, femme fatales like Yvonne De Carlo, films like Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), Roger Vadim’s *Bar-
barella (1968), and the 007-series, as well as an homage to women participating in more male working class pursuits such as welding, motorcycle riding and driving big cars. Can all of these varied images of pop culture, sexuality and global power be put into a meaningful relation?

Video Phone gains cohesion through its suggestion of an arc of desire culminating in orgasm. Music video directors have become more skilled at suggesting such an arc: Francis Lawrence’s video for Lady Gaga, entitled Bad Romance (2009), similarly, suggests a wide range of types of pleasures, all within 5 minutes. Video Phone’s closing shots perhaps allude to Luis Buñuel’s opening for Un Chien Andalou (1929) with its slash through the eye. Both a gun in Video Phone, and a knife in Un Chien Andalou, suggest penetration.

Video Phone could be seen as gay identified. Beyoncé and Lady Gaga are divas loved by both the gay community and young women, rather than by a large male contingent (many in the gay community consider her transgendered; Lady Gaga has been compelled to deny this41). Beyoncé’s big t-shirt (fig. 6) might comment on Jamaica’s homophobia: embossed with an alien wearing both male and female gender-symboled earrings, it might speak in code about present day international gay rights: for example, right now, in Uganda, a law is being passed to put homosexuals in prison (Alsop 2009). Those convicted of “aggravated” gay activity or having AIDS can be executed. The American right is supporting this.42

For gay pornographer Paul Morris, Video Phone is all about Beyoncé’s chewing gum and Lady Gaga’s genitals.43 He notes Gaga is a very white small male/tranny utterly outdone by Beyoncé. The camera guys are white, the shirtless/headless men are black (except for at minute 1:46, where the male might be black, Latino or white). The blue hoods (figs. 4 & 5) add a softcore terrorism/torture reference, sexualized as blue/boyhood. The bound boy at minute 1:46 (fig. 5) is wearing a blue/male hood, pink/fem jacket, and no shirt. His legs are spread, suggesting strength, confidence and male genitalia. The halo around him and the blue background suggest blamelessness and anonymous identity. This moment (vulnerable anonymous masked white male, legs spread, torso bound) refers to the crux of the video. Halfway into the clip, Lady Gaga spreads her/his legs to “prove” to the camera the crucial absence of male genitalia. The lyric “You like what you see?” really means “Do you like what you don’t see?”

The video’s lyrics contain puns and innuendos. “You wanna video me” parallels “you wanna use me” or “you wanna fuck me” or “you wanna own me.” Since this clip concerns video phones, the “can you handle it” suggests, “can you masturbate to me,” or can you handle the absence.44 The absence in Beyoncé is her vagina; for many gay-identified viewers, the absence in Gaga is the effort to remove or deny male genitalia. An intimation that the video considers sexual difference comes early. At the opening, Beyoncé sings “uh-uh,” or “no,” while wearing a bandit mask and leading her male posse (Kill Bill [2003/2004] and Reservoir Dogs references: fig. 1), her “no” takes on lethal force with the soundtrack’s reference to Ernio
Morricone’s scores for Spaghetti Westerns. After the slow dissolve to Beyoncé’s eyes, we see a nervous camera-headed man straightening his tie (fig. 3) who might embody our subject position—we too might feel nervous when Beyoncé directly asks us: “Shorty, what’s your name?”

I’ve claimed that music video is a heterogeneous medium, with many simultaneous, nearly equally engaging events Vernallis 2004: 43, 129). With music video, we must chart our own paths through music and image to find meaning. Music videos also ask us to watch them repeatedly. Lacking in narrative devices, text, and with a shortened form, they rely on reduced materials to convey drama. On the web, resources for engaging attention may become even more attenuated. In Video Phone, Hype William foregrounds one of the most minimalist of materials—color—through several means, including raced bodies. Departing from standard industry practice, he does not balance Beyoncé’s skin tone across the video, sometimes going for very deep, rich hues, sometimes a more lightly-complexed, Lena Horne look. These changes often correspond to the song’s rises and falls.4 Beyoncé’s irises sometimes shift to the deep brown or black, and in the pin-up section they are a grayish blue. Perhaps to foreshadow the turn to a more European American pin-up look, in the clip’s Reservoir Dogs Spaghetti Western intro, one of the African American men in Beyoncé’s posse is trailed by a strobing halo of curly blonde hair.46 One might judge here that our imaginary for what constitutes American beauty remains white, Anglo-Saxon protestant.

Yet on a second register, Williams argues differently about color. After an opening in sexualized, hyper-aggressive reds and blacks, the video turns neutral white and black, and then shifts to deeper blues and pinks. Easter-egg, pastel colors sweep in (particularly with Lady Gaga), which suggest innocence and femininity. In the pin-up section, gemstone-like rich emeralds and darker gray turquoises appear. Beyoncé posing as a Betty Page-like pin-up strokes her machine gun up and down, and the shaft is a deep violet purple—a color of tumescence, of sexual excitement. If we keep our attention directed to the hues of her gun, we will eventually be carried along with a densely saturated blue and green that can lead us through surrounding fiery oranges, reds, yellows and magentas. This blue and green possesses special resonance for filmmakers. The two hues share little in common with skin tones so they can be used in matte backgrounds to key out unwanted parts of the frame (such as in the weatherman’s blue-screen). For directors, chromakey blue and green have a special, race-neutral value. Following the video’s changes of color, rather than its representations of people, may be the best way to experience it.

The song supports the image’s dense web of signification. The music is unsettling and exotic.47 Are there menacing elements at the periphery? The Morricone opening features a G-Phrygian ostinato (Bb, G, Ab, G), a mysterious, dark figure that hovers over the song like a cloud. The upper register ostinato’s unsettling quality derives partly because it appears on the off-beats, with its highest pitch on the offbeat of beat two. When
Beyoncé states “Shorty, what’s your name?” we suddenly shift to a happier Mixolydian mode in Eb (a scale with a major 3rd and a flat 7th), yet the Phrygian ostinato still remains. (Beyoncé will sing more of the Mixolydian scale’s pitches at “cologne in the air.”) Both Mixolydian and Phrygian are somewhat exotic. The Mixolydian occasionally turns to the flat side and, at one point (when Lady Gaga asks “Can you handle it?”), both the flat 3rd and the major 3rd occur simultaneously. In the rhythm track the more muffled drum hits sound like an irregular heartbeat (belonging to us or to the bound man?). However exotic, the song is redundant, so small changes seem big. The showbizy horns where Beyoncé and Lady Gaga dance, and the overdubbed women’s voices completing a major triad (“take a cameo”) register as key events.

8. MIRRORING THE INTERNET, ELICITING PARTICIPATION

Successful YouTube clips attempt to embody, depict, and participate in the network. The self-similarity of reiteration makes it possible for videos to sync up with others, creating a more frictionless path through the web’s nodes and links. Each clip should excite, but also elicit an urge to continue on through YouTube. *Haha Baby, Charlie Bit My Finger, Evolution of Dance, Chocolate Rain*, and *Sneezing Panda*, put people in a rhythm as well as in an excitable state that carries them forward. Like a wind-up toy, a web user needs to keep moving through the web to diffuse energy and affect. A second point: viewers and uploaders tend to experience the web in isolation, as monads (each person with a computer peers into and attempts to draw information out of the network). Clips like will.i.am’s *Yes We Can*, *Haha Baby, Charlie Bit My Finger* and *Panda Sneezing* are directed to solo viewers. Last, YouTube clips aim to connect with one another and the world. Viewers and content seem to project a dream of the construction of a total media library. YouTube’s range of clips, with their trailing panoply of video blogs, all spanning the healthcare crisis, religion, and the latest pop concert, are concerned with getting linked up. Parodies on high-ranking clips and how-to’s on the most banal topics—like modes of washing kitchen utensils, including more than one spoon (and then remakes of that), reveal a wish to fill in all the chinks.

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The frontal images and images of infinite regress in *Video Phone* both speak to the viewer and suggest diverging paths that all lead into the network. The dancing camera-headed men underscore the gathering images, which can be relayed out into the web. The clip’s sexual excitement, against its intimations of boredom, may create enough anxiety and drive to keep viewers streaming through at a regular pace, continuing through to other web links. In response to YouTube’s encyclopedic drive, this video’s cata-
logue of women performers could be an attempt to retain and organize an array of visual imagery. *Video Phone* also reflects the hunger for people and clips that can be seen, heard, discussed and played out. Is *Video Phone* a comment on the last Presidential election and today’s politics? It might reflect American culture’s darker side that a campaign video like *Yes We Can* failed to address—what’s been left out and put aside, in *Video Phone*, seems found and brought near. One might feel ambivalent about the Abu-Graib type of imagery—photographing torture shouldn’t be sexualized or made desirable. Nevertheless, many contemporary films depict torture (*Star Trek* [2009], *The Bourne Ultimatum* [2007], *Slumdog Millionaire* [2008]). It’s part of our history and our psyche. Can these images be put in relation with sexuality, gender, and nationalist movements?

9. **Politics, Music Video and YouTube’s Evolving Discourse**

The politics of *Video Phone* will seem objectionable to many. It can make viewers anxious, as the YouTube commentary shows.49 Consciously or unconsciously, viewers know African American women have fewer choices of image than do European American women. Once they’ve aligned themselves with what’s understood as the raunchy or the tawdry, they may be less able to move to more traditionally valorized subject positions (as Madonna has been able to do somewhat successfully). Beyoncé’s videos have tended to be sexy but also classy – Beyoncé’s older videos share little with *Video Phone*’s clashing models of good and bad sexuality. A woman may be allowed to take pleasure from bondage, but she shouldn’t then be the around-the-way B-girl or pin-up for our boys overseas. She might move up from peep show artist to lounge performer to an even more redeemed state in a field of nearly-pure-whiteness, but she shouldn’t turn it around again by becoming a B-girl and a pin-up, and then vulnerably approach orgasm while at the same time performing the role of a bored sex-worker and military trainer. But in order for clips to register on YouTube, such clashes with our cultural categories may become increasingly more common. Violence and stupid humor, sexual vulgarity and prissiness, are often conflated on YouTube.50 On the site, repetition with jarring discontinuity holds viewers.

We may want to accept what *Video Phone* does with representations of gender and sexuality. Both Hype Williams and Beyoncé have made a range of work, some of it very progressive.51 As long as makers and viewers critically engage with a variety of media, including those with positive representations, why not grant these artists the space to make a clip like *Video Phone*? Hype Williams rarely works with white artists; giving him some latitude may be wise. His engagement with gay culture and aesthetics may suggest a different subject position than that of other directors. *Video Phone* might be an opportunity to assemble loved icons, gathered from a
history of looking at media. Williams’s response to the song is appropriate: alienation, jadedness, and ennui belong to the song proper. Williams can make clips with great tenderness, pathos, humility or uplift.52

I can’t predict where music video and YouTube will go. Many genres exhibit a cycle of birth and death and relatively short runs. Who would have thought music video, after its recent low points, would come back with such ferocity? Neither am I claiming that this article’s description encompasses all of YouTube. The site’s corpus is unfathomable, stretching from documentaries, to university lectures and to clips on opera. Nor do all contemporary music videos share these aesthetics. If bandwidth, screen size and budgets increase, music video may return to a more classical mode.53 Given music video’s uncertain future, it’s a good idea to keep an eye and an ear on Hype Williams and Beyoncé. Few artists have been able to straddle large media shifts. Think of film’s transition from the silent to talkies, or changes due to television. Hype Williams, more than any other director, has flourished as music videos have moved from cable to YouTube. Beyoncé too has been able to maintain her artistic and star status in a newly digitized, connected age. These are artists to follow.

REFERENCES

1 | Some stylistic techniques common in 80s music videos recur today: simple cyclorama backgrounds, primary colors, clothes changes, limited props, and a stripped-down premise.

2 | E-mail correspondence with Amy E., executive director, the music video production association, Fall 2008.

3 | Conversation with Aaron Retica, staff at the New York Times, Fall 2008.

4 | This, of course, the title of Kate Perry’s smash-hit from 2008.

5 | Autotune the News is a series of clips, available on YouTube, where the Brooklyn musician Michael Gregory has taken a number of evening news broadcast snippets which he comments upon by turning them into R&B pieces. His own voice as well as the voices of the people appearing in the news clips (such as news presenters, politicians etc.) are electronically altered with the help of the software program “Autotune” which normally is used in order to help singers’ voices to achieve “perfect pitch.” See as an example Autotune the News #2: Pirates. Drugs. Gay Marriage: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBb4cjjj1gl (last access 10.3.2010).

6 | The Duck Song, music by Bryant Oden, animation by Forrest Whaley (2009): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtN1YnoL46Q (last access 10.3.2010). The Badger Song, a musical cartoon by British animator Jonti Picking, released in September 2003: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPvRVK9YbZM (last access 10.3.2010).

7 | Oden has even released a CD which he sells on http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/bryantoden2 (last access 10.3.2010).
For Haha Baby, a clip of a laughing baby, responding to the noises made by a male adult, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NzQUtEIQXX0 (last access 10.3.2010).

For Kung Fu Baby, a clip of a baby making Kung-Fu-like moves being accompanied by music, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxAirY-5QCQ, for Dramatic Chipmunk, the clip of a chipmunk accompanied by a dramatic and rousing score, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1Y73sPHKxw (last access 10.3.2010).

For Evolution of Dance, showing the performance of comedian Judson Laipply, who dances his way through the history of popular dances, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMH0bHeiRNg; for Charlie Bit My Finger, showing a baby biting an older boy’s finger (one of the most viewed videos in YouTube), see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=he5fpsmH_2g (last access 10.3.2010).

Liminal videos existing near the genre’s borders include Automatic Mario: Queen’s ‘Don’t Stop Me Now’, Alice, and South Park’s remake of Pork and Beans (a response to Weezer’s original Pork and Beans). For Automatic Mario: Queen’s ‘Don’t Stop Me Now’, an online advertisement, matching four parallel levels from “Super Mario World” levels with the pitch and beat of the Queen-song, see: http://www.break.com/game-trailers/game/new-super-mario-bros/automatic-mario-queens-dont-stop-me-now.html; for Alice, a song by the Australian Electronica musician Pogo, based on snippets from the soundtrack of Walt Disney’s Alice in Wonderland (1951) and originally released on YouTube in 2007, accompanied by spliced scenes from the film see: http://www.yooouuutuuube.com/v/?rows=36&cols=36&id=pAwR6w2TgxY&startZoom=1 or http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zP7bl8JJlVA; for the South Park characters Kyle and Stan performing Pork and Beans see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kekmyVT9HRs (last access 10.3.2010).

Over the last few years, music video has hit several nadirs. (Post-2000, many music video fans could only view music videos through high-tiered cable. Regular cable programming like MTV had switched to reality shows.) During YouTube’s first years, music video sites like Launch, AOL, and MTV streamed videos but bandwidth was narrow and budgets were low. As advertising moves to the web, music video budgets will most likely continue to grow. Currently directors gain higher budgets by including product placement. During MTV’s reign, product placement was not permitted.

I’ve spoken twice with a staff person in PR at YouTube, but still have many questions about the site.

A prosumer is a person in postindustrial society who combines the economic roles of producer and consumer – the notion has been coined by futurologist Alvin Toffler in his 1980 book The Third Wave.

For The Sneezing Baby Panda see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzRH3iTQPrk; for the Gizmo Flushes (a clip, showing the obsession of the cat Gizmo with toilet flushes) see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WofFb_eOxxA (last access 10.3.2010).

For the APT Obama Obama (a remake of the Lil’ Wayne’s A Milli) see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7RZTlzXHmo; for Barack Obollywood (a clip, editing
images of Barack Obama in a way that he seemingly performs a Bollywood song) see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sA-451XMsuD (last access 10.3.2010).

17 | For the Hechizeros Band, El Sonidito see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgNFOlo5W0I; for El Mudo, Chacarron Macarron (Crazy Music Video) see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l12Csc_IW0Q; for Jon Lajoie, Sunday Afternoon see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gx3nn6LS6g (last access 10.3.2010).

18 | When music videos first appeared, many theorists and critics complained that they were incoherent or schizophrenic. At the time it seemed difficult to decipher what music videos might be saying or what their effects were. As mentioned earlier, music video on television has become less and less important, though more and more people are watching videos on the web. Strangely, part of the aesthetics of web-based music video lies in its grounding function. Clicking among sites and multitasking so regularly, a three-to five-minute moment of music can actually provide both ground and respite—a moment of emotional connection. Shared with others, videos take on a social dimension.

19 | Here are some examples of psychedelic reiterative clips on YouTube: Dan Deacon & Liam Lynch - Drinking Out of Cups, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skCV2L0c6K0; for Shrooms: A Trip Experience see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4pxnuUG1k&feature=related; for Pick of Destiny Shrooms see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guCPHG2ys9k&feature=related; for Fischerspooner Get Confused see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIjmpp1wt4 (last access 10.3.2010).

20 | For Shoes (directed and interpreted by the comedian Liam Kyle Sullivan) see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCF3ywukQYA (last access 10.3.2010).


22 | Note the video’s beginning when Beyoncé wears a third-world influenced t-shirt while she intimidates a bound man. We’ll return to this later in the video.

23 | Conversation, Lawrence Sterne (professor in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies McGill University), Spring 2009.

24 | See for this video also the introduction to this volume:p. ***.

25 | For the clip, showing a webcam video from 2004 of Gary Brolsma, who filmed himself while himself miming to the song Dragostea Din Tei by the Moldovan pop band O-Zone and thus gained worldwide cult status as the “Numa Numa Guy”, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=60og9gwKth1o&feature=fvst (last access 10.3.2010).

26 | For David After Dentist see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txqiwrbYGr8 (last access 10.3.2010).

27 | Much early photography depicted spirits. The record’s spirals were also said to carry direct imprints of voices from the dead.

28 | For Obama and McCain – Dance off! (a clip from 2008 by David Morgasen, featuring a fictitious dance duel between Obama and McCain) see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzyT9-9lUyE (last access 10.3.2010).
For Leave Britney Alone! (by Chris Crocker) see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHmvKRoeowc; for Fred Loses His Meds see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9MA0eW8yyw. For Crocker see also the article by Jacke in this volume: ***.

For Chocolate Rain, composed and performed by Tay Zonday, one of YouTube’s most all-time popular clips, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwTZ2xpQwpA (last access 10.3.2010).

In an email message, colleague Alan Finke (VP of Development at MShift, Inc., San Francisco) sent me the following: “Did you watch it on a video phone? I did. They told me to. It takes on a different quality. The minimalism becomes very sharp and clear, the 8-bit casio sound becomes very appropriate in a GameBoy way and the most interesting thing is the lighting. It turns an iPhone into a little box of light that you hold in your hand. There’s a sort of 3d quality with a depth that extends behind the phone into your hand, and there’s a cool moment near the end where a burst of fire from a gun breaks the frame (another penetration reference?) And there’s a whole other quality to being able to hold the performers in your hand. You can possess them, but you can’t touch them. They’re in a flat frame, but they’re in a 3d world and you can tap on the glass.”

Enter Kazoo Man: Metallica Enter Sandman performed on KAZOO by Mister Tim (multitrack) is a clip in which the teacher, composer, conductor and performer “Mr. Tim” reinterprets the song Enter Sandman by Metallica on a kazoo; since his version was recorded on multitrack, the video is echoes this by presenting four musicians (all played by “Mr. Tim”) in a split screen – see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iC65ufGUvKM (last access 10.3.2010); a similar solution is presented in the Michael Jackson Medley – http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R12QVtuB0_Q (last access 10.3.2010) – where the multitrack recording of Kurt Schneider’s voice is visually represented by having Schneider appear parallely six times on stage.

For the video for the song by LL Cool J (ft. Wyclef Jean), Mr. President, directed in 2008 by LL Cool J and Ron Lakis see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lE32yCxy87I (last access 10.3.2010).


Tick-Toxic: Mashup of Britney Spears and Gwen Stefani which combines the music and the visuals from the videos for their songs Toxic (video directed in 2004 by Joseph Kahn) and What You Waiting For? (clip directed in 2004 by Francis Lawrence) see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRHfd9Yto0A (last access 10.3.2010).
See the section on condensation for more discussion of Video Phone's intertextuality. Telephone references Kill Bill (Quentin Tarantino, 2003/2004), Thelma and Louise (Ridley Scott, 1991), Noir, B-movies and YouTube fan culture. See John Rich – Raisin’ McCain Music Video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmKgLTejfge and john.he.is: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gwqEneBkUs which parodies will.i.am’s Yes We Can-video (see below note 48) in order to let McCain appear in a critical light.


Many students in my production courses have never taken a college general education “Intro to Art” course: elementary through high school hasn’t afforded them artistic training either. They’re very excited but their skills are not very high.

See for example the Video Phone Remix Beyoncé and Lady Gaga (Cordless Phone Spoof): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfHh8Jh5F0w (last access 10.3.2010).

“...look at photos of myself, and I look like such a tranny! It’s amazing! I look like Grace Jones, androgynous, robo, future fashion queen. It’s not what is sexy. It’s graphic, and it’s art.” See http://popwatch.ew.com/2009/02/09/lady-gaga-inter (last access 10.3.2010). There are also ample references from gay sources citing Gaga as a gay icon. For example, her profile in OUT magazine says: “A life of glamour is an ethos to which every gay -- from the 17-year-old Dominican tranny voguing in his bedroom to the tanorexic middle-aged Miami circuit queen -- can relate. It’s one reason we love Gaga. Another, of course, is that Gaga loves us back. Gayness is in Gaga’s DNA.” And: “Her devotion to gay culture is unparalleled by any other artist operating at her level of visibility or success.” See for this: http://www.out.com/detail.asp?page=2&id=25720 (last access 10.3.2010). See also a youtube video alleging her transsexuality (1,231,978 views): “Breaking news: Lady GaGa is actually a MAN!”: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P36i5BaAP6w (last access 10.3.2010).

It doesn’t seem unreasonable to me that Williams, Beyoncé, and Lady Gaga or the clip’s costume designers and other technicians might have added a subtle detail like this to the video. Many of my friends and colleagues in the gay community follow international gay rights closely. Choreographer Michael Peter’s finger snaps in John Landis’ music video for Michael Jackson’s Thriller (1983) is one example of a touch added to speak to the gay community.

Interview, December 3, 2009.

The line “Can you handle it” is at the same time a clear reference to the song Bootylicious, interpreted in 2001 by Beyoncé’s former group Destiny’s Child.

Watch the video from minute 3:10.

Note the fourth shot into Videophone’s opening. The blonde-haloed man enters left of frame at minute 0:29 and exits at 0:37.

Conversation about the song and musical analysis offered by Charles Kronengold and Jesse Rodin (professors in Musicology at Stanford), December 10th 2009.

For this video see the introduction to this volume: p. ***.
49 | 1alexandra12: “horrible... Beyoncé you dissapointed me.. and lady gaga you are an ugly slut....”

shakirap483: “Beyoncé owns the stage not lady gaga she's wired in head in so many ways" taytaygurl09 “this is a unique video, but what's with all the toy guns?”

1111GENESIS: “@taytaygurl09 the video is symbolic for the gay revolution.”

MrSweetJuice: “lady ga ga is the worst fucking singer or w.e she is on the planet.....i mean the bitch is fucking terrible and all her songs sound the same and im pretty sure shes a fucking guy....fucking tranny cunt nigger, FUCK HER!! and honestly fuck her gay faggot homosexual fanbase, all you HIV carrying monkeys need to be put to death right along with niggers and Lady ga ga the fuckign tranny cunt!! oh and all u faggot fudge packers better not message my profile with homo messages OR ELSE!!!”

LiteSkin87: “Beyoncé is bad, thick, and delicious looking, but man, she is straight sleazy. She’s married, for shit’s sake. Stop talking about how niggas is hitting you up and you’re assuming the position. Sit your ass down and have a kid somewhere.”

norhophobia: “yep she’s an official whore now. i wouldn’t want my man or my daughters watchn her vids now..and would feel uncomfortable watchn w/ my momma around or anybody for that matter @liteskin87 i agree she’s married wth this is disgusting....it’s sad cuz she’s so talented u can see she is pretty and “sexy” w/o her acting and lookn like a street walker in all her vids smh”

nautigirl2774: “apparently sex sells, but this a totally crap video. I used to think that Beyoncé had class, but now see that she’ll do anything to make a buck. So much for being a role model to young girls, she looks like a tramp.”

cobra902001: “Please Wake up people, this video is about Beyoncé and Lady Gaga promoting bi-sexuality, don’t let the elite brain wash you any longer”

rainbowskies400: “Umm..not sure how to feel about this video. haha”

All of which are from just one copy of Video Phone: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btuRgzlaZso

50 | See for this for example Thomas the Taxi Driver, a snippet from the children program Thomas the Tank Engine, combined with the vocal track from the scene in Martin Scorsese’s film Taxi Driver where Harvey Keitel’s character describes all the things his prostitute is capable of doing: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=usfkjbsjNtk (last access 10.3.2010).

51 | Examples include the videos for Beyoncé’s If I Were A Boy (directed in 2008 by Jake Nava) Irreplaceable (directed in 2006 by Anthony Mandler) and Hype William’s Diamonds from Sierra Leone for Kanye West (2005) and The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly) for Missy Elliot (1997).

52 | See for example those for Ne-Yo, Go On Girl (2007), Wu-Tang Clan, Can it Be All So Simple (1994) and Taral Hicks, Silly (1997).

53 | The video by Francis Lawrence for Lady Gaga’s Bad Romance (2009), suggests this might be so.
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