

Digital Killed the Video Star

“Interactive Music Videos as Digital Folk Culture: Johnny Cash's ‘Ain't No Grave’”

Leigh H. Edwards, *Department of English, Florida State University*

As interactive digital music videos grow in popularity, it is important to analyze the ideological ramifications of this trend. To what degree are these videos merely examples of media companies exploiting user generated content for corporate profit? To what degree do some allow for greater audience agency as artists use digital networks for varying degrees of collaboration? While some interactive videos exploit fans for free labor or marketing and invite only a superficial level of participation, there are nevertheless others that do generate substantial fan contributions and audience-centered uses of this media technology. They can provide intersubjective performative spaces for expressive fan culture. As we continue to debate the degree to which online interactive texts are instances of companies turning the democratic promise of the Internet into corporate profit, I would argue that the ideological content of these videos depends crucially on their socio-historical context. We must provide deep analysis of each case study in order to assess their cultural politics.

Indeed, I would argue that some interactive online music videos can be considered digital folk culture, providing a creative use of participatory fan culture that allows for more audience agency, specifically greater access to media production and distribution, and aesthetic expression.

A key case study of a more audience-centered text is Chris Milk's crowdsourced video for Johnny Cash's "Ain't No Grave," which has fans draw online on documentary film frames that Milk compiles into hundreds of versions of the video. Fans can circulate and profit from the images they create. Because it utilizes a substantive level of user collaboration, the video is an example of interactive digital media that gives audiences greater access to media production and distribution. The video's content, meanwhile, meditates on the imbrication of folk culture and mass media and speaks to the ability of folk culture to adapt and survive in our digital era.

Milk combines Cash documentary film footage with fan art. Via Milk's website, fans use a custom program to draw on each frame of the documentary footage, with many users contributing elaborate artwork and individualized messages. Milk then combines all the frames, making the online video look like an animated film. Different fan-drawn versions of the same frame play at different times, making multiple versions of the video; the site functions like a changing online curated art gallery with open-ended participation. Audiences vote for favorite frames that appear more frequently.

While the term digital folk culture is hotly debated, I use it to mean that the video takes on the resonance of folk culture because it is created through a collective interaction, even though that interaction is now happening on the Internet. The Cash video content also makes it relevant to digital folk culture, because it depicts a musician and genre associated with folk culture in a digital context. In the historical footage, Cash journeys home to his childhood Arkansas cotton farm, then to the Virginia grave of A.P. Carter, the uncle of his wife June Carter Cash and patriarch of the Carter Family who helped usher in commercial folk or "hillbilly" music in the 1920s, based on recordings of earlier folk songs. As the Cash video uses an interactive digital format and fan participation to explore this historical journey with a famous artist, it meditates on the folk roots of country music as an art form that combines folk culture and mass culture.

The website's interaction with fans is complex. I am not arguing that the video is a non-profit co-creation. Because it is an advertisement for the album, the video does monetize fan art and profit from user generated content and labor. Milk does also profit from idealized notions of folk culture (with Cash as a symbol of a folk hero) and community. However, the fan expression is not entirely controlled by Milk. Fans can draw what they want on this footage owned by media companies and can share, even sell their frames, and their artwork is substantial. Fans grant Milk non-exclusive

rights to use their artwork for free, but they can circulate it. Without the copyright permissions Milk secured for the Cash footage, fans could not have circulated art using proprietary footage, unless they got permission from rights holders. Ultimately, the video is a collaborative text that turns consumers into participants with some degree of creative agency, at least a limited agency.

As media companies find more ways to monetize fan culture, some interactive digital texts invite a superficial level of participation to profit from free fan labor, making users advertising targets rather than substantive cultural producers themselves. However, some like this Cash text do allow substantial consumer contributions and greater production access, providing meaningful collaborations with listening communities.