

Music Video in the Digital Age

“Recent Music Video Trends and the Possibilities of Black Expression”

Laurel Westrup, *University of California, Los Angeles*

Throughout their history, music videos have frequently been associated with technological and aesthetic innovation. [David Bowie's *Ashes to Ashes*](#) (1980) uses chromakey to paint an alien world, and [A-Ha's *Take on Me*](#) (1985) weds live action and rotoscoped footage. Both are frequently cited examples of boundary-pushing videos that contributed to MTV's reputation as the crossroads of experimental art and popular culture. More recently, the digital glitch aesthetic and addition of non-song elements in Lady Gaga's collaborations with director Jonas Åkerlund in videos like [Telephone \(2010\)](#), have received a great deal of attention. Many of these celebrated examples of music video innovation have featured white artists. However, the last five years have demonstrated that new distribution platforms and aesthetic strategies, especially longer running videos and digital effects, have also opened a space for innovative Black expression. For example, musicians Kendrick Lamar, Benjamin Booker, and Beyoncé, and music video director Kahlil Joseph, are using contemporary music video trends to highlight historical and contemporary forms of oppression such as police brutality.

I don't mean to suggest that Black performers and directors didn't previously make innovative videos. Michael Jackson's *Thriller* paved the way for the recent trend toward longer, more narratively oriented music videos, and director Hype Williams spawned countless imitators in the 1990s with his videos for hip hop artists like Busta Rhymes and [Missy Elliot](#). Williams frequently used a fish-eye lens to make his subjects appear larger than life, and the supernatural effect of this technique anticipates more recent digital manipulations of the body in Kendrick Lamar's and Kahlil Joseph's work.

Recent videos by and featuring black artists are often more overtly political than Jackson's and Williams' videos were. In [Kendrick Lamar's *Alright*](#), for example, digital editing gives the rapper the supernatural ability to float above the city, occasionally alighting on a light pole and inspiring awe from onlookers below. This ability, along with other fantastical images such as a quartet of policemen carrying Lamar's car, encourages the viewer to buy into his fantasy that "we gon' be alright." But are we? Even in this dreamscape, Lamar's lyrical statement that the police "want to shoot us dead in the street for sure" is fulfilled when he's shot down from his perch by a policeman. But then Lamar, having slowly hit the ground, smiles up at the camera. The digital editing throughout the video plays with our expectations about how particular bodies might perform in the world, and consequently calls into question the status quo of American race relations.

[James Lees' short film *The Future is Slow Coming*](#), which features Benjamin Booker's songs "The Future is Slow Coming" and "Wicked Waters," also takes police brutality as a theme. While Lees' film doesn't use digital effects like *Alright*, it showcases another recent trend: longer, more narrative music videos. At over eight minutes, *The Future is Slow Coming* would have been a hard sell in the MTV era, but digital distribution has made longer videos a more frequent phenomenon. This additional runtime allows for more nuanced storytelling. The first part of the video tells an elliptical story about police brutality in a small Southern town in the 1960s. The narrative reaches its climax when diegetic gunshots puncture the song, several citizens are killed, and Booker, after standing up to the police, is arrested. When the police make a traffic stop (clearly framed as an incident of racial profiling), Booker escapes from the car, running across a field while police gun fire follows him. Music provides salvation when he runs into a bar, picks up a guitar, and starts playing.

The Lamar and Booker videos are clear examples of current music video trends enabling politicized Black expression. More complex is Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade*. As a nearly feature length work comprised of videos for twelve songs as well as interstitial spoken word pieces, *Lemonade* clearly demonstrates the trend toward longer music video works. It's also Beyoncé's most politicized work to date. The iconography of slavery runs throughout the album, and there are clear allusions to the Black Lives Matter movement: Michael Brown's mother appears as one of several women holding pictures of lost loved ones in the video for "Forward." Like Lamar, Beyoncé also uses digital aesthetics to signify alternative possibilities for black bodies. In "[Sorry](#)," Beyoncé exhibits director Kahlil Joseph's signature glitchy movement. The hard digital cuts contrast "softness," a quality that Beyoncé earlier equates with attempts to mold herself for male consumption.

There's clearly much more to unpack here. I have sketched a couple of ways that *Lemonade*, Lamar, and Booker use longer narratives and digital effects to articulate the ambivalence of 21st century racial politics. I'm interested in the impact these strategies might have on an increasingly diverse and dispersed audience, and in additional possibilities for Black expression music video might enable.

Links:

David Bowie, *Ashes to Ashes* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMThz7eQ6K0>

A-Ha, *Take on Me* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djV11Xbc914>

Lady Gaga, *Telephone* (featuring Beyonce, directed by Jonas Akerland)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVBsypHzF3U>

Missy Elliott, *The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)*, directed by Hype Williams

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHcyJPTTn9w>

Kendrick Lamar, *Alright* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-48u_uWMHY

Benjamin Booker and James Lees, *The Future is Slow Coming*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Lfr4JxxCig>

Beyonce and Kahlil Joseph, "Sorry" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxsmWxxouIM>