

## Music Video in the Digital Age

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It has been written (though less frequently in this century) that other arts should aspire to the “pure” form and function of music. In the spirit of this outdated notion, I would like to claim that audio-visual media should aspire to be more like music video. In the digital age music video continues to offer the opportunity for media practitioners and audiences to experience the best possible joining of sound and images: to visualize music. Between *The Dickson Experimental Sound Film* (1894/95) and the P. T. Anderson-directed Radiohead video “Daydreaming” (2016) is the history of music video.

To theorize and analyze music video in the digital age requires an address of both “new” and “old” technologies, a consideration of how images become “music-ed” in the past and present, and how new technologies allow greater access not only to new content but also to forgotten content. Music video may not be as close to the center of media study as in previous decades, but scholars continue to grapple, at least, with the work of Kanye and Taylor. And even *Entertainment Weekly* offers coverage of music video, including Adele’s “Send My Love (To Your New Lover)” and Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* (2016). The discourse around *Lemonade* as a “video album” demands an address of Toni Basil’s *Word of Mouth* (1982), Michael Nesmith’s *Elephant Parts* (1981) and other “long form” works offering more than a single song (country, soul, rock, hip-hop and more).

Such texts are fostered and by online platforms. Vevo, and especially YouTube, provide the opportunity to users to experience a succession of “videos” whether organized by the artist herself, a fan, or user-composed. YouTube allows, or encourages, users to make their own mix(video)tapes whether favoring a single or multiple artists. This work can achieve the same bliss offered by the sixth “bonus” *Busby Berkeley Disc* (which is actually the heart) of the *Busby Berkeley Collection*. The disc consists only of the musical numbers from Berkeley’s most famous Warner Brothers’ films and offers more than two hours of a joyous flow of music and movement. Here is “cinema” that moves and sings and dances. Here are music videos.

Music videos are musical sequences (in musicals and *Ex Machina* [2015]), Scopitones, Soundies, and more. We should, in fact, date the beginning of “music video” with *The Dickson Experimental Sound Film*. That film, though not offered in the moment with sync sound, remains

an ideal use of sound/image technologies because it lays out a range of potentials for filmed music in offering the performance of music, the technologies of sound capturing (and also playback), and a demonstration of how a body should respond to music: by moving. Interlocked bodies move to the performance of “Song of the Cabin Boy,” a well-known song of the time (and what we might call a folk song).

This film, if projected with sync sound at the time, would certainly have driven sales of sheet music, just as later music videos are also always bound to a range of other texts: songs, films, albums, artists, artist media “channels,” labels, directors, tours, etc. These films, videos, and texts offer bodies moving, sound that is more than dialogue (though speech can be musical) and a dance of sound and image. Most filmmakers and theorists ask for less. As Alfred Hitchcock once noted in a different context: “I’m not against movies that *talk*, that photograph people talking—they’re a kind of movie. But they’re not *motion pictures*.” Hitchcock advocates for film as more than just an “extension of theatre;” he promotes his chosen medium by denigrating the one to which film is most often compared. Elsewhere Kim Jong-il concedes that “sound is art” but more commonly offer statements like this: “It hardly needs to be said that music should be used to intensify an atmosphere, but even given this fact, it should be subordinate to the vivid depiction of the hero's emotions.”

Thankfully, music video, or musical media, is ours to define and create (and not necessarily in that order). There is no need for a “hero” or even a plot. The promise of music videos is of a dance of bodies, light, images, colors, voices, rhythms, instruments, and noise. Radiohead’s “Daydreaming” offers Thom Yorke’s body traversing space (mostly corridors and doors). But the movement of his body (only walking), the flow of images, the structure of light and rhythm, all provide more cinematic dancing than Yorke’s gyrations in “Lotus Flower” (2011). 35mm prints of “Daydreaming” arrived at select theaters with a note that begins: “We’ve made a film.” Though many theaters are no longer able to screen celluloid prints, the insertion of “Daydreaming” into these spaces should remind us of Vitaphone shorts, *Michael Jackson’s Thriller* (1983) and cinema’s (seldom fulfilled and often neglected) promise to merge image and sound.