Music Video in the Digital Age

"ZX Spectrum Experiments and the Definitional Borders of Music Video"
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This call asks structural and aesthetic questions about music video's migration from basic cable outlets to online platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, and Vevo. Potential implications of this migration include: whether distribution changes have affected aesthetics, whether algorithmic culture impacts what videos are seen and heard, and whether new platforms might allow for greater representational equity. Mapping the extent to which these changes manifest in new online environments is this roundtable's laudable central task, but I would like to add an additional implication from music video's online era. Sites such as YouTube function as de facto archives that provide a platform for music video's forgotten histories, allowing us to trace little known experiments that might otherwise be lost. These experiments in turn challenge traditional definitions of music video. One such experiment: the rudimentary animated music videos designed for playback on the Sinclair ZX Spectrum Home Computer.

Before describing ZX Spectrum videos, I want to detail the limited and specific ways in which online music video platforms might fulfill an archival function. Like traditional archives, these sites attract those who want to share their collections with broader audiences, but without the relative promise of continuity and permanence. YouTube giveth and taketh away, due to copyright issues, interpersonal disputes, subject matter, and personal whim. But the sheer breadth and depth of a given site's "holdings" can and do challenge traditional definitional borders of short-subject music-and-moving image subjects, so that narrow

definitions with roots in the MTV era no longer hold. And as categories broaden, we are called upon to consider the larger generic and technological properties of this broader view.

What examples might we find? It's true that digital video platforms have inadvertently led to the rediscovery of various analog music-and-moving image practices of the last century: Vitaphone musical shorts, Soundies, Scopitones, as well as direct to VHS (and later, DVD) music video formats. But there were also experiments that began in digital contexts, most notably on personal computers. Such was the case with the ZX Spectrum computer.

In the 1980s, Britain's Sinclair ZX Spectrum was a popular and affordable home computer. The ZX Spectrum was unique in that 1) its keyboard connected to television screens for display, which allowed for affordability; and 2) its computer programs came via audiocassette cartridges, which ensured a malleable format (and which brings to mind the Fisher-Price PXL-2000 pixel camera's similarly non-traditional use of the audiocassette). The ZX Spectrum's popularity led to the programming of rudimentary 8-bit music video and video game programs – embedded in musical recordings. Because ZX Spectrum computer programs could be transmitted by audiocassette, this allowed musicians to transfer computer programs embedded in audio tracks and recorded onto cassette into the ZX Spectrum computer for playback. Recording artists such as Pete Shelley (Buzzcocks), The Freshies (Chris Sievey, pre-Frank Sidebottom) and the Thompson Twins each took advantage of the technology's unique interface, by embedding rudimentary music videos and/or video game programs within audio. Each track on

Shelley's *XLI* album (1983) featured ZX Spectrum programming. After loading the songs into the computer, the user would wait for the program to load and then see sculptural and kinetic visual patterns along with the lyrics to each song (**clip**). Perhaps understandably, the music video research of the 1990s largely ignored these experiments. The few ZX Spectrum music videos that were made were forgotten, until a few enthusiasts began sharing earlier experiments via YouTube and other sites, similar to the Commodore 64 in a US context. But given the ZX Spectrum videos, it is an interesting question to ask: how do our questions regarding music videos change when we no longer assume their role is limited to traditional broadcast models?

As we chart changes in music videos amidst their "digital turn," we should also trace forgotten antecedents. I see the ZX Spectrum experiments as part of a larger history of abstract visualizations of music often excluded from music video history. They bridge avant-garde filmmaker and "father of visual music" Oskar Fischinger's short films and contemporary music visualizer interfaces (iTunes, Eyegasm, etc.) for personal media. Tracing such forgotten connections between seemingly disparate media traditions necessarily means broadening the definitional boundaries of "music video" now available via the digital archive.