CHAPTER 6

Spike and Michel

Spike and Michel

MTV may have created its own subculture, and its own notions of artistry, but it had fallen short of feature filmmaking in creating its own geniuses—artists who fully grasped, and embraced, the peculiar possibilities and limitations of the music video. Throughout the 1980s, the music video was a hot spot for experimentation and innovation, with directors like Godley and Creme, Russell Mulcahy, Steve Barron, Jean-Baptiste Mondino, and Danny Kleinman breaking out as exemplary short-filmmakers. However, the notion of director as auteur did not truly reach the music video until the early 90s, and the rise of two filmmakers who would come to dominate the form as no directors before them had done: Spike Jonze and Michel Gondry. (MTV had laid the groundwork for greater recognition of directors by posting directors’ names in the credits of every video they showed, beginning in 1993.) Jonze and Gondry would later rise to Hollywood prominence as the directors of Being John Malkovich (1999) and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004), respectively, but their apprenticeships were served in the music-video factories. Brothers beneath the skin, both directors tugged playfully at the genre conventions of the music video, crafting hip, self-aware clips that rewarded multiple viewings and marked the beginning of a new era in videomaking. Jonze, a TV brat at heart, sought solace in the half-remembered joys of the culturally fleeting, choosing the ephemeral, and the simulacrum, over the lasting and real, creating something fresh out of culture’s stale leftovers. Where Jonze was more pop-culture savvy, sticking collective cultural memory in a blender and hitting “puree,” Gondry mostly avoided the familiar thickets of pop, preferring to cobble together an alternate world of the unusual and alluring. Never satisfied with simplicity where complexity would do, Gondry’s music-video work embraced the
tangled, gnarled aesthetic of modernism, alleviating that form’s fatal seriousness with a soufflé of Gallic humor and a twist of sheer oddity.

**French Twist**

Gondry, a Frenchman born in Versailles in 1963, was an art-school graduate who entered the world of the music video through the back door, directing videos on a shoestring budget for his band Oui-Oui. His later French work includes two videos whose bravura technical mastery and charming wit are precursors to his American videos. His video for Jean-François Coen’s tender ballad “La Tour de Pise” (1993) is a small masterpiece, turning itself into a combined sing-along and lecture on graphic design. Beginning with a screen set up like a panel of cards, Gondry establishes a rhythm of opening the panels from left to right, top to bottom. It takes a minute, though, to realize that the panels, a mélange of natural imagery and snippets of the French landscape, also contain commercial signs, and that those signs spell out, in bits and fragments, the lyrics to “La Tour de Pise.” Some of the signs from which the lyrics are snatched are highly familiar (the “La” of the song’s title is taken from the end of a Coca-Cola logo), while others are delightfully one-of-a-kind. Gondry provides a playful answer to the age-old music-video question “How do you turn music into image?”

During the song’s closing guitar solo, Gondry offers the comic coup de grace: a sign that says “guitar,” followed by a series of musical notes. “La Tour de Pise” is a dream for post-structuralist music buffs seeking to deconstruct the music video, but Gondry is less concerned with theory than praxis. Enjoying the challenges he sets for himself, Gondry creates little worlds with every video, each one complete with its own unique composition and rules. Part of the joy of watching a Michel Gondry video lay in determining just what those rules might be.

Gondry’s clip for IAM’s “Le Danse Le Mia” (1993) likewise adopted a rigor-ous structure that paradoxically left room for a great deal of playfulness and spontaneity. Using the technique known as zoom-morphing, Gondry’s camera unceasingly penetrates further and further into its established space. This was no mere trick of beginning with a wide-angle long shot and zooming closer; Gondry starts fairly close in to his subjects, making you wonder just how he can possibly maintain this wire-walk for the clip’s entire length. Going from a performance at a smoke-filled club to a street scuffle to a series of middle-aged guys chanting the song’s chorus, “Le Danse Le Mia” is a perpetual-motion machine that never appears bored with anything in its sights. In the video’s most remarkable magic trick, Gondry zooms into the sunglasses of lead MC Akhenaton as he scuffles with a bystander. Reveling in having seemingly painted himself into a corner, Gondry zooms deeper into the shot of his sunglasses until he is focused on their reflection, managing to zoom his way into a reverse shot of his original shot. Like a restless, gifted child who can only summon the interest for a project when challenged beyond his capabilities, Gondry delights in making the impossible possible.

His French videos having attracted her attention, Gondry set to work in 1993 on his first clip for a non-French audience: the Icelandic chanteuse Björk’s “Human Behaviour.” A twisted take on the classic fairy tale, “Human Behaviour” turns Björk into a Little Red Riding Hood manqué. Since “Human Behaviour” is a surrealist fairy tale, its governing theme is that actions lack consequences; therefore, although Björk falls hundreds of feet to the ground, in the next sequence, she floats in a river, the moon bathing her face with white light. In the topsy-turvy atmosphere of “Human Behaviour,” the bear, not mankind, is king, and his reign is a return to environmental wholeness. Gondry runs wild inside the fairy tale, twisting it into both a visual extension of Björk’s dotty, fanciful imagination and a Sierra Club-friendly cartoon (much like the subtle environmentalism of his video for Oui Oui’s “Le Callou” [1989]).

Here, as in much that would follow, Gondry tinkers with differing levels of reality, establishing one baseline of reality only to immediately snatch it away. Gondry’s videos render it nearly impossible to establish what is and is not real; instead, they must be taken on faith, their illogic accepted as logic. Never content to leave us content, Gondry unceasingly tampers with his product, his wizardry poking and prodding our senses. Fundamentally dreamlike, Gondry’s videos follow the irrepressible logic of reverie—objects shrink and grow without warning, perspectives suddenly shift, and, most essentially, the fundamental rules of reality are subtly tweaked.

Like the ideal collaborations of architect and client, in which the client’s well-articulated desires and the architect’s technical know-how and artistic savvy meld to create a superior final product, the pairing of Gondry and Björk has been one of the most fruitful in the history of the music video. Let loose by her music’s avant-garde daring to dream freely, Gondry’s work for Björk is among the most unfettered work in his oeuvre. It is also a pitch-perfect visual complement to Björk’s music, composed of a similar blend of humor, beauty, and sheer oddity. Björk has been Gondry’s best client because her music already exists on the borderline between fantasy and reality. Is Björk real, or does she merely play herself on TV? Gondry, fascinated by exploring the liminal regions where dreaming and waking hours, the real world and the imagined world, mingle, found the perfect collaborator in Björk, whose songs are practically Gondry videos all on their own.
Björk and Gondry collaborated on five more videos, each of which elaborated on her kooky-chanteuse vibe. "Army of Me" (1995) features Björk as the driver of a three-story-high tank, so large that regular-sized cars drive underneath it. Her body contains wonders as well: her legs magically extend so she can reach the tank's engine, and a dentist extracts a gleaming diamond from her mouth. Needless to say, this is Gondry, the dentist is a gorilla, and Björk must tie him down to retrieve her treasure. Tossing the diamond into her vehicle's engine, it rumbles back to life, and she steers her way to a nearby museum. Wearing a black karate outfit, she steps past some Damien Hirst-style color-field paintings and sets a stick of dynamite next to a sleeping statue. Running out just seconds before the museum blows up, she returns after the smoke has cleared to find the statue, now flesh and blood, awake and unscathed, and the pair hugging, surrounded by broken artworks and dead bodies. Is Björk an art-world avenger, literally blowing up in the face of the mediocre and the careerist? Is it a touching futuristic love story à la Blade Runner (1982)? Or is it her lyric's promise that "if you complain once more, you'll meet an army of me" brought to Technicolor life? With "Army of Me," as with the majority of Gondry's work, the meaning is less in interpretation of individual segments than in their overall sensation. Like certain paintings of the Pop Art era, they are meant to be ingested all at once, not broken down into their constituent elements. "Army of Me" is funny, bizarre, imaginative, and a touch frightening—a formula that appears time and again in Gondry's work.

A recurring theme in Gondry's work is the attempted reconciliation of nature and technology, lending to nature some of technology's solidity and to the man-made some of nature's essential mystery and beauty. In seeking to unite diametric opposites, Gondry looks to the imagination for inspiration. In "Isobe" (1995), a set of lightbulbs with miniature airplanes growing inside bloom in the ground, and a small metropolis sprouts in the dirt of a garden. Björk is enveloped by the tiny airplanes, each buzzing and emitting light like mechanical dragonflies. Gondry enjoys keeping his viewers on their toes, denying the comfort of steady values or stable measures. "Hyperballad" (1996) includes videogame-like footage of Björk dashing past electricity towers and diving into a ditch, but midway through the video, Gondry reverses course: the video game imagery becomes real, and what had initially been dismissed as obviously fake becomes something neither here nor there, caught between the real and the unreal. His video for The Chemical Brothers' "Let Forever Be" (1999) is a similarly dizzying closed loop of reversals promulgated through sleight-of-hand, with digital effects and chunky, handmade faux effects elevating for supremacy.

Above all, Gondry revels in blurring boundaries, crafting puzzle boxes where fantasy and imagination take precedence over logic and narrative. This is most evident in his video for Björk's "Bachelorette" (1997) where layer after layer of complexity piled onto an initially simple premise. Like "Je Danse Le Mia" and the Foo Fighters' "Everlong," "Bachelorette" is an extended riff whose power partially derives from Gondry's remarkable expansion of its seemingly limited capabilities. "Bachelorette" begins with Björk's voiceover: "One day I found a big book buried deep in the ground. I opened it, but all the pages were blank. And to my surprise, it started writing itself." Mixing grainy, flickering images of Björk in the big city with archival urban photographs, "Bachelorette" evokes a bygone era in the life of the metropolis, and in the history of the musical. Enthused about the book, her publisher accompanies her to the office of a theatrical impresario, who agrees to put on a show based on the book. Opening night, the curtain rises, and wouldn't you just know it—the show we see onstage bears more than a passing resemblance to the story we've already seen. Except that the mise-en-scène has grown even more stylized and outlandish—the book has grown man-sized, the train heading to the city is one solitary car whose side flips up to allow for the protagonist's egress, and Björk's path to the publisher's door is lined with words. Ouroboros-like, the play swallows the staging of the play itself, moving to a smaller stage concealed at the back of the stage. The train grows smaller, the skyscrapers shorter, and the show's audience is similarly miniaturized. Gondry has set up a hall of mirrors in which Björk's Great Adventure with the Book can be endlessly retold. Only at the point, Björk and her publisher bauw part ways, and the story begins to disappear as mysteriously as it appeared. Her book's ending is erased, and key elements of the stage set start to vanish as well: her ex-boyfriend, sitting in the audience, turns into a shrub, a similar fate befalls his theatrical counterpart, and nature in general takes its revenge on this urban tale, a frightening leafy beast consuming everything in sight.

Gondry can never quite settle the tension between nature and society, neither here nor elsewhere, so he abandons "Bachelorette" on this ambiguous note of threatened destruction. There is a similarly unresolved tension swirling around the notion of art and artistic fecundity. Here, as in "Army of Me," sterile or clichéd art is punished with destruction—there by terrorism, and here by the revenge of Mother Nature. Gondry sets up a straw man, depicting a particularly airless brand of creativity in order to knock it down. It is almost as if Gondry, as a young artist on the upward curve of his career, feels the need to wield his scythe and slice up a few easy targets, just to prove he could. The rhetorical violence may feel a bit over-the-top and unnecessary, but it is part and parcel of Gondry's mission to crown himself Something New. In his passion to reimagine the possibilities of the music video, Gondry took the occasion, Godzilla-like, to swipe with his giant paw at the pretensions of the rival arts as well.
The theatricality of “Bachelorette” is evidence of Gondry’s persistent fascination with performance, a trait that bears full flower in his Busby Berkeley-esque clip for Daft Punk’s “Around the World” (1997). Gondry sets in motion an ingenious rotation of figures, like the movement of an infinitely complex watch. Five separate groups of individuals move around a central platform, each marching to the beat of their own drummers in sync with the rhythms of the song. B-boys with tiny shrunken heads appended to their track suits, skeletons, space explorers, mummified hospital patients, and bathing beauties move to the beat, with Gondry’s camera alternately close up and swirling above the dancers, lifting Berkeley’s camera angle of choice. Gondry’s DIY musical provides no context, although it clearly takes place on a soundstage. It merely is, as if the camera had stumbled on the event in medias res. Gondry synchronizes his dancers’ movement with the different sounds of “Around the World,” each group of dancers representing one discrete instrument: the B-boys bounce up and down a flight of stairs in time with the bass line, the bathing beauties dance to the synthesizer’s beep and burble, and the space explorers circle the stage as a visual representation of the vocal track. Gondry is summoning the ghost of the Hollywood musical past, but it also aims for a quasi-scientific process of alchemization. “Around the World” seeks to turn music into motion, directly translating sound into vision.

Straight-faced absurdity is also the order of the day in Gondry’s video for Beck’s “Deadweight” (1997), ostensibly meant to promote Danny Boyle’s A Life Less Ordinary, the film from whose soundtrack it is taken. Gondry lifts a good deal of footage from A Life, but he uses it to spin an entirely different yarn. (Likewise, his video for Polyphonic Spree’s “Light and Day” [2004] borrows from Gondry’s own film Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, snipping out and replacing the characters’ mouths to turn scenes from the movie into a comically amateurish attempt at lip-syncing.) On a golden-hued beach where children frolic and couples soak up the sun, we spot a traditional-looking office setup straight out of a 1950s movie: metal desk, file cabinet, coat rack. Beck sits behind the desk, dressed in a conservative black suit, fusing with his papers, entirely oblivious to his idyllic surroundings.

“Deadweight” is a testament to the powers of shot and reverse shot, with Gondry cleverly cutting between small doings on the beach and larger-scale scenes from the film itself. A man tosses a matchbox car into the water, and the next shot shows a truck tumbling over a cliff. Beck falls into the sand, and Life star Ewan McGregor hits the ground in a similar position, pummeled by a posse of thugs. Gondry, relishing the prospect of taking the familiar and rendering it unfamiliar, slaps a traditional American office smack in the middle of a traditional American vacation. After that parlor trick, what could be better than to follow the joke to its logical conclusion? Packing a suitcase full of Hawaiian shirts and a framed piece of wallpaper (his family photos cover the walls), Beck puts on a white leisure suit and heads to an average-looking office. Setting up a beach chair in the middle of the office floor, he soaks his toes in the now-liquid carpet. In the final scene, Beck heads to a movie theater, where he watches himself relaxing on the beach and working at the office, and laughs heartily at the ludicrous absurdity of it all. A gloss on the classic scene in Luis Buñuel’s The Phantom of Liberty (1974) where a bourgeois family and their guests sit around a table, each perched atop a toilet, with individuals occasionally excusing themselves, entering a small room, and eating. “Deadweight” provocatively jumbles the stuff of our everyday lives and shows us the world afresh.

Gondry’s recurring interests culminate and consolidate in his masterpiece, the Foo Fighters’ “Everlong” (1997). “Everlong” is an irritation of irrationality within the orderly confines of comforting, safe space. It also features Gondry’s most detailed disquisition on dreaming (succeeding his darkly humorous video for Cibo Matto’s “Sugar Water” [1996]), a full-on philosophical exploration of the dream state in which it ultimately becomes impossible to say which part of “Everlong” is “real” and what is merely dream.

“Everlong” begins in black and white, with two fearsome-looking strangers lurking in the bushes of a suburban street. Slipping inside one home, the camera crawls up the stairs, past a wall of photos of the man of the house and his wife (played, respectively, by Fools leader Dave Grohl and drummer Taylor Hawkins, in drag) and into their bedroom, where the happy couple slumbers. Zooming in on Dave’s face, washes of water pour over the screen (a traditional signifier for the beginning of a dream sequence), and the placid suburbanite is transformed into a punk rocker, with black leather jacket and bleached spiky hair. Black and white also switches to color for the dream, in a reversal of cinematic convention. Striding past a pair of out-of-place lumberjack types (played by his bandmates Pat Smear and Nate Mendel) at an 80s-themed party, Dave struts into a room full of New Wave revelers to find his wife being hassled by the very same rednecks. Back at home, Dave’s wife also slips into a dream, in which she reads a romance novel while sitting on a rocking chair in a rural cabin. Suddenly, a trapdoor creeps open in the floor and a hand pokes out from underneath. Back to Dave’s dream, where his rage at the offending miscreants causes his hand to grow to superhuman size. First smacking them around with his outsized appendage, Dave grabs one by the lapels and bashes his head repeatedly against the low tin ceiling in time with the song’s pounding drums. Dave, still in bed, punches the air in his sleep. The would-be assailants vanish from Dave’s dream, only to transfer themselves over to his wife’s dream, lurking outside her cabin. In Dave’s dream, the couple leave the party and end up in a room filled
by a giant rotary telephone. The phone rings, and Dave and Taylor cover their ears, shielding themselves from the ear-splitting noise. Dave awakes and discovers that the phone is ringing in their bedroom.

Gondry, deliberately laying out his cards openly here, is setting up his audience for a major fall with this supposed return to normalcy. Picking up the phone, Dave immediately looks over at his sleeping wife. Taylor, trapped in her cabin by the backwoods types, bars the doors in a desperate attempt to keep them out. Meanwhile, Dave chops wood, blithely oblivious to the mounting crisis. In bed, Dave desperately tries to shake his wife awake (which registers in her dream as one of the intruders knocking her around) and, gritting his teeth, struggles to fall asleep once again and join her in her dream. He first finds himself in a different bed, caressed by a bevy of lovely ladies, but he shakes that dream off and the women fall away like a disused backdrop, the only evidence of their presence the red shoe attached to one of the pieces of wood in his hand. As the baddies get set to wield their comically oversized chainsaw and hatchet, Dave pierces the membrane of his wife's dream, his hand grows to enormous size again, and he proceeds to smack the living daylights out of them then dump them in the lake (where they appear to be mere mannequins). We return to the bedroom, where the two intruders lie in wait by their bedside. Have they come to wreak yet more havoc? As it turns out, they've come to rock, and they strip off their costumes, their entire bodies popping out through their engorged mouths, simultaneously shedding their skins and playing their instruments as if possessed of four hands. Jamming on their instruments, the song returns front and center, and the preceding events become nothing more than—a bad dream.

Where the realm of sleep elsewhere in Gondry's work is rendered with soft-focus delicacy, "Everlong" is infected with a malevolence that is difficult to shake off. Dreams are not just real, they are potentially deadly, and while "Everlong" is humorous, there is something genuinely frightening about its danger. Like Richard Linklater's film Waking Life (2001), "Everlong" is an extended series of interlocking dreams whose force often exceeds that of the waking world. The world of "Everlong" is unsafe, unstable, fraught with anxiety; even ensconced in their beds, deep in sleep, its middle-class couple is tormented by elusive, hideous demons. Although perhaps Gondry is satirizing Americans' obsession with violence, finding even placid-seeming suburbanites' dreams wholly devoted to violence and danger? "Everlong" subscribes to a logic familiar from our own dreams, not to mention the dream states created by cinematic masters like Buñuel and Linklater. Tools magically appear and disappear, limbs grow to enormous size in a matter of seconds, and unassuming individuals take on superhuman powers as a matter of course. Reality is always a step out of reach, leaving us struggling to piece together the logic of what we see. "Everlong" is the pinnacle of Gondry's videomaking, achieving the dual miracle of appearing wholly unfamiliar and instantly recognizable.

Gondry found another willing client in Detroit rock duo the White Stripes, whose aesthetic (red and white color scheme, faux legendary background story) was already a Gondry fever dream. For each of their four videos, Gondry set himself a back-breaking task to accomplish, with results ranging from the humdrum (the underwhelming "Dead Leaves and the Dirty Ground" [2002]) to the astonishing ("Fell in Love with a Girl" [2002]). Returning some of the whimsical charm of early music videos to an increasingly computerized, FX-laden genre of filmmaking, Gondry is an artisan of the short film, painstakingly hand-crafting his own works. In "Fell in Love with a Girl," the bulk of the video is dedicated to the band straightforwardly bashing out their tune, with one crucial caveat—rather than their flesh-and-blood selves, singer-guitarist Jack White and drummer Meg White are constructed from thousands of tiny Lego pieces.

With so much contemporary filmmaking, music video and otherwise, devoted to computer wizardry, it was refreshing to see a video so thoroughly dependent on the homespun and hand-crafted. Like studying a medieval fresco, though, it is difficult to watch "Fell in Love with a Girl" without simultaneously marveling and agonizing at the sheer amount of labor required to make it. With no CGI assistance, every single frame of the video required a different Lego configuration, and, considering the breakneck pace of "Fell in Love with a Girl," the work involved is simply staggering. Pulling the curtain back from his often effortless-seeming work, Gondry presents "Fell in Love with a Girl" as the Agony of the Director. Of course, "Fell in Love with a Girl" is also a remarkable example of extracting beauty from inexpressive material, but it is near-impossible to separate any enjoyment of its splendor from a similar appreciation of its awe-inspiring difficulty. Using what must have been about a million red and white Lego pieces, "Fell in Love with a Girl" intersperses "performance" footage with Lego-assisted décor—spirals, arrows, and walk signs. The video is evidence of Gondry's fascination with the childlike, being only one of the two clips the director has dedicated to iconic toys of middle-class childhood: Radiohead's "Knives Out" (2001), which celebrates the game Operation, being the other. Gondry is a childlike director, embracing wide-eyed wonder over cynicism, and children and icons of childhood play a substantial role in his work, from the urchins that accompany Kanye West on his nighttime romp through Macy's in "Heard 'Em Say" (2005) to the fairy-tale bear of "Human Behaviour."

Gondry's taste for the artisanal and the handmade finds expression in a different medium in his video for Stereogram's "Walkie Talkie Man" (2004). Like
“Fell in Love with a Girl,” “Walkie Talkie Man” goes to absurd lengths to fulfill the requirements of its underlying principle—here, to knit an entire video out of yarn. Even more so than that Lego-heavy video, the labor of “Walkie Talkie Man’s” production is a part of the video itself, at least in symbolic form, with a young woman (herself made out of yarn) furiously knitting guitars, drums, and microphones for the band to play. As always, Gondry sees his scenario through to its logical conclusion, and so we have a studio floor covered with thread instead of wires, a knit camera whose film is a clump of yarn, and a screening room where the screen is attached to spools of yarn. This retro clip also has a knit King Kong attacking the Capitol Records building where the band is recording, only to be foiled by a masterful counterattack: one of the band members pulls some string off the end of Kong’s fingers and attaches it to a reel-to-reel tape recorder, slowly unraveling the ferocious beast.

Gondry’s video for the White Stripes’ “The Hardest Button to Button” (2003) also employs unusual material, making the instruments themselves the building blocks of its visual scheme. “Hardest Button” emphasizes the song’s persistent beat with an initially simple visual formula: every time Meg presses her kick drum, the number of drum kits multiplies exponentially (2, 4, 8, etc.), and she moves farther away from the camera. Soon Jack appears as well, and he walks down the steps of an urban park playing his guitar, with the drums following closely behind. “Hardest Button” renders physical all the hoary rock-crit clichés about singing in front of or behind the beat. Gondry enjoys intensifying or complicating his initially simple formula, and as in “Around the World,” “Hardest Button” grows steadily more and more convoluted until it is a veritable blur of action. Gondry increases the speed of the action, drums and amps piling up to fill the frame, and vanishing just as quickly. Going from a walk to a trot to Mach 3, “Hardest Button” is a speed demon, gobbling up time and space under cover of its voracious beat.

“The Denial Twist” (2005) is constructed out of neither Legos nor yarn, but shot on film with flesh-and-blood actors. Nonetheless, Gondry’s most recent video with the White Stripes fits comfortably into the director’s aesthetic of artisanship, being a one-take clip with a dizzying array of shifts in perspective. Jack and Meg pay a visit to Late Night with Conan O’Brien, then get in their car, drive home, and watch the show. Stretching and compressing effects wreak havoc on our sense of perspective, with people and objects growing impossibly large, or shrinking to infinitesimal size. The narrative itself also messes with perspective, with doublings and repetitions lumping the entire video into one dense interlocking unit. After the band visits Conan, Conan visits the band, stopping by their house and making awkward small talk in their living room. The video is crammed full of echoes, and in some unexplained sense, the two spaces, talk show and living room, are inverses of each other, each subtly and mysteriously affecting the other. Jack and Meg are blessed with supernatural gifts in “The Denial Twist,” and Gondry’s video leaves us with the impression that we are seeing only the tip of the iceberg. There is also the distinct sensation that the video’s spaces are themselves magical, capable of bending the laws of time and space to their own unexplained needs. As with all of Gondry’s video work, the true magician remains offscreen, casting his spells for three-minute periods, invigorating the stultifying music video with traces of the uncanny, the dreamlike, and the wondrous.

The Joker

Spike Jonze, born Adam Spiegel, in 1969, has long claimed to be an heir to the Spiegel magazine fortune. In reality, while distantly related to the actual heirs, Jonze did not grow up fabulously wealthy, but his straight-faced biographical deception speaks to his love for pranks, practical jokes, and all forms of trickery. Getting his start as a maker of skateboard videos, Jonze became a known figure among skaters for his work, which featured all manner of spills and marvels. Jonze first broke into music videos working for the Beastie Boys, the musical group who most share his bratty, jokey sensibility, and assisting video vets Tamra Davis and Kim Gordon (of Sonic Youth fame). With a few clips under his belt, Jonze’s first MTV success came with the video for the Breeders’ “Cannonball” (1993), codirected by Gordon. While lacking in the sustained visual innovation that marks Jonze’s later work, “Cannonball” is notable for its MTV-friendly take on experimental filmmaking, taking that subgenre’s deadpan outlandishness and creating a bite-sized, juniors version.

A savior to good but ephemeral alt-rock singles, Jonze developed entertaining, accessible, and delightful accompanying videos that brought them their share of glory. Nineteen ninety-four was the year MTV was first taken over by Jonze’s oddball, brilliant creations, playing them again and again in a closed loop of incongruous humor and surprising elegance—rampaging dogs, meandering golf carts, Vegas swagger, and 70s television pastiches.

It was his second video for the Beastie Boys, released one year after “Cannonball,” that would prove to be the most memorable, MTV-beloved of Jonze’s work. Crowned in 2002 by VH1 as the second-greatest video of all time (topped only by another Jonze production), “Sabotage” chooses as its source material the credit sequence of an imaginary TV cop show of the 1970s, starring the three Beasties in costume, excessive facial hair, and heavy makeup as tough guys kicking ass and taking names. Opening with a shot of a flashing police siren, “Sabotage” engages in the single-minded pursuit of every police-related cliché it
can track down, simultaneously paying homage to a lost era of unsophisticated cop shows and mocking them for their ludicrous earnestness. And like character actors sinking their teeth into particularly juicy roles, Mike D, Ad Rock, and MCA ham it up here, clearly loving every second of their transformations into urban warriors. “Sabotage” is a video in motion, with nearly every shot filled with speeding cars and running cops. The Beastie cops kick down doors, climb buildings to conduct surveillance, leap across rooftops, and go undercover as hotel staff to bust a drug dealer. The clichéd nature of the action in “Sabotage,” and its lack of dialogue, play directly into Jonze’s hands; like an episode of your favorite old cop show on mute, the plot is so familiar, so shopworn, that no words are necessary for comprehension or appreciation.

Undercovers dressed as bellboys chase after a drug dealer (played by “guest star Sir Stewart Wallace,” better known as MCA in a fright wig) and fall into a pool while grappling with him; they disarm a Scandinavian man on a bridge, who proceeds to fall headfirst into the water; they tackle a perp headfirst into a mountain of garbage bags on an urban street; they run full speed toward the scene of the crime. Jonze’s video is note-perfect parody, a Tarantino-esque blending of pop culture past and present into a frothy milkshake. “Sabotage” only mocks what it loves, and thus every detail is just right, down to the garish 1970s-relic red-and-yellow logo that appears onscreen mid-video. Jonze lets the Beasties mug to their hearts’ content in “Sabotage,” hitting on the common factor between the New York City hip-hoppers and small-screen cops: a tendency to gesticulate wildly and engage in rounds of quasi-meaningless hand signals. “Sabotage” jabs lovingly at the self-inflated pomposity of its source material, ending with a freeze-frame on each of its cops before a slo-mo shot of the trio walking their turf, just three officers of the law doing their job. “Sabotage” is a masterpiece of the form for its ability to synthesize client and idea, bringing together the Beasties’ own pop savvy and hipster humor with Jonze’s concept. Jonze has done his best work for artists with the ability to take the piss out of themselves, possessing enough confidence to know that mocking themselves via Jonze will be a mutually beneficial act.

Jonze’s follow-up with the Beastie Boys’ “Sure Shot” (1994), similarly allows the group to run free in a campy, quasi-surreal wonderland, to enjoyable but less triumphant result. The trio, joined by sidekick Biz Markie, wanders through the casinos and alleyways of Las Vegas, at times dressed in tuxedos, at times in B-boy gear. There is a single moment when the Beasties exchange elaborate hand signals before entering a casino that feels like a “Sabotage” outtake, but the bulk of the video is a performance clip, with few added bonuses. As is appropriate for such a name-check-heavy song, Jonze cut in inserts of each of the icons “Sure Shot” references: Lee “Scratch” Perry, Rod Carew, John Woo. Jonze used a camera poised at ground level and equipped with a bar to grab onto; each MC bends down to rap, taking hold of the bar when the camera ascends, and flying through the air together.

Jonze’s pair of videos for power-poppers Weezer follow a similar formula: one offbeat performance clip, and one TV-damaged piece of Zeig-esque cultural japery. Jonze is a director attuned to the immediately accessible, indelible image, and “Undone (The Sweater Song)” (1994) is “the video with the dogs.” Mid-video, as Jonze shows drummer Pat Wilson sighing while playing, with a “just another day at the office” look on his face, a herd of dogs pounce from off-screen, hurting themselves toward the band and then across the stage. Jonze injects some levity into the oft-stone-faced proceedings of the performance video, taking “Undone” from the strained seriousness of its opening black-and-white footage (admittedly shown upside down) to the low comedy of Wilson wiggling his butt while playing, running around his drum kit as the song surges into its finale, and heading partway up the blue backdrop before collapsing as the dogs dash offstage.

Both parody and homage, “Buddy Holly” (1994) implants Weezer’s members, Forrest Gump-like, into the real world, or the real world of fondly remembered television shows at least. Unlike Robert Zemeckis and Tom Hanks’ vision of post-WWII American history, “Buddy Holly” is uninterested in jacking into the front-page past of wars and presidents, just the collective fantasy realm of lowbrow television programming. “Buddy Holly” plants a big sloppy kiss on the face of Happy Days, the semi-beloved sitcom about a 50s family, creating a unique cultural wormhole: a 90s video nostalgic for a 70s TV show nostalgic for some bygone myth of 50s teenagerdom, a pastiche of a pastiche. “Buddy Holly” literally inserts the band into the show, seamlessly placing them inside Happy Days hangout Arnold’s, where they perform for Richie and the gang. Jonze, a connoisseur of credit sequences, opens “Buddy Holly” with a piece of the show’s credits, appropriately crediting himself as the director, and a prototypical TV announcer declares an “exciting event” in the making. Inside, Al, the restaurant’s proprietor, introduces “Kenosha, Wisconsin’s own . . . Weezer!” but won’t leave the stage before pleading with patrons to “please—try the fish,” to hoots from the laugh track. The band, in sweaters and ties, appear onstage, their performance superimposed on a shot of dancers taken from the show, blending past and present, reality-pastiche and pastiche-pastiche. Sitcom drama takes place at the fringes of the video, with Richie Cunningham (Ron Howard) slamming the bathroom door in disgust, and the Fonzie (Henry Winkler) walking in to Arnold’s to the cheers of the studio audience. Jonze blends the band into the sitcom action as well, with guitarist Brian Bell mouthing “I love you” to a swooning girl in time-capsule-worthy catgirl glasses. “Buddy Holly” has a laugh
at the expense of bygone television traditions, pausing midperformance (right after the Fonzie’s entrance) to announce “TO BE CONTINUED,” to the audience’s groans. In appropriate sitcom fashion, and continuing in the vein of “Undone (The Sweater Song),” the band engages in shameless winking, mugging, and preening, adopting the broad comic tone of Happy Days, and by extension all the middlebrow sitcoms of the era, and making it their own. Returning for part two (“stay tuned for more Happy Days,” the announcer beseeches us), the band finds itself in a predicament wearisome familiar to any Happy Days character: upstaged by the Fonzie, who steals the scene by doing a vaguely ethnic-looking dance. At song’s end, he gets all the applause, forcing even the band members to clap for him as he makes a triumphal exit, a lovely lady on each arm. In a postscript, Al congratulates the band, then asks for a verdict on his fish special. Imitating the less-than-positive response he receives, Al exits to a huge laugh and thunderous applause as he turns out the lights.

“Buddy Holly” finds Jonze zapping his own work into the television set, creating a bizarre cultural universe where contemporary bands engage in dialogue with the television shows of their youth. Jonze is like a DJ here, not content to merely love his favorite cultural artifacts, but wanting to make them his own. Like a far funnier, wiser version of the film Pleasantville (1998) (which was heavily influenced by “Buddy Holly”), Jonze implants a contemporary sensibility on the ghost of television past, with decidedly hybridized results. Borrowing a page from Woody Allen’s famous chameleon Zelig, and from 1994’s omnipresent Forrest Gump, Jonze inserts his clients into the culturally mediated past of their (and his) choice; the perfect parlor trick for the irony-afflicted, hipster-than-thou aura of the mid-90s.

For bands with a less noticeable funny bone, Jonze made an odd choice of a video director. Grunge godfathers Dinosaur Jr and Cali one-hit wonders Wax both employed Jonze’s services, with mixed results. The former’s “Feel the Pain” (1994) made a small MTV splash, garnering the underappreciated postpunk pioneers some long-overdue acclaim, but the video is at odds with their moody dirge. Band members J Mascis and Mike Johnson tour around the streets of New York in a golf cart, playing a round of urban golf. Teeing off from the Flatiron Building, their balls fly over the Empire State Building, land near Lever House, jet through Central Park, and land on a rooftop with an unencumbered view of the World Trade Center. While a pleasant tour of the city’s architectural sights, and laced with some of Jonze’s trademark humor (the golfers beat the crap out of some suits who make the mistake of touching their ball), “Feel the Pain” is a misfire, matching Jonze with performers whose aura does not sit right with his own.

Wax’s “California” (1995) has a similar handicap, although Jonze’s clip for the song does not contain the band at all. Taking the time limitations of the music video and making hay of it, “California” is a slow-motion epic, expanding ten or so seconds of full-speed footage to fill an entire video. Opening in close-up, and slowly zooming farther and farther out, “California” moves out from a shot of black boots to an image of a man in a baseball cap, silver jacket, and jeans sprinting at top speed, while on fire. The first indication that things are not quite what they seem, though, is when he checks his watch. Bystanders pay him no attention whatsoever, and he hardly pauses as he passes a puddle and a fire hydrant. Waving his hand in the air, and flailing wildly, we see that he is attempting to flag down a bus, his flame-engulfed clothing no real concern of his, possibly just an expression of his haste. “California” is clever, but its cleverness wears thin quickly, nothing more than one silly joke expanded to epic length. Jonze is at his best when he has personalities to work off, some source material to reference from his clients, but Wax give him little, and the result is work devoid of his signature cultural wizardry.

Not content to work with only one of the masters of the form, Björk hired Jonze to shoot a video for her single “It’s Oh So Quiet,” from her 1995 album Post. Seeing the song as a showstopper from some lost French musical, Jonze cast Björk as the star of his slightly demented song-and-dance number. “It’s Oh So Quiet” is Jonze’s attempt at re-creating the aura of classic Jacques Demy musicals like The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (1964) and The Young Girls of Rochefort (1967), with Björk as the kooky, perky leading actress. The video begins with Björk in a filthy bathroom, washing her hands, with the song’s opening chords kicking in as she exits. These opening shots are so underlit that it is difficult to decipher the surroundings, and the camera keeps its distance, letting a constant stream of people, tires, and tools get in the way of our view of Björk. When “It’s Oh So Quiet” kicks into high gear, with Björk’s scat-singing, and a big-band orchestra as backup, Jonze lets in the sunshine, flooding the shot with light. Mechanics step in as background dancers, and Björk does a soft-shoe with a soda delivery guy and the store’s mascot, a giant wrench. Later in the video, she kicks a newspaper machine, which sets a bystander off on a series of backflips and a posse of old ladies in sundresses to twirling their parasols. Jonze uses a Busby Berkeley-esque overhead shot of the ladies spinning their umbrellas in unison, before splitting them apart into separate components. In the finale, Björk mopyly hugs a mailbox, and when the musical number returns, the mailbox itself sprouts legs and arms, and begins to dance. Even the Doric columns on a nearby building do a little jig before a crane shot lifts Björk high above the dancers still cavorting in the street.

“It’s Oh So Quiet” continues Jonze’s interest in pillaging the cultural past for inspiration, even if this time, he headed all the way back to an era and style that most of the MTV-watching audience would be dimly aware of at best (much like the Godzilla references of Elastica’s “Car Song” [1995]). Once again, Jonze
pays homage by poking fun, creating a dizzyingly ditzy tribute to the musical by borrowing its conventions to create a delicious, bizarre-world spin on them. “It’s Oh So Quiet” finds a side to Björk that Gondry had never tapped into, casting her as a zany analog to Gene Kelly or Catherine Deneuve, the glamorous cutup, and providing some of the inspiration for her later starring role in Lars von Trier’s Dancer in the Dark (2000). The video is also proof of Jonze’s restless artistry; not content as a mere pilferer of half-remembered television shows, with “It’s Oh So Quiet” he exhibits his own exquisite eye for what goes into a good video. Perhaps one of the reasons that artists like the Beastie Boys and Björk came to depend on Jonze was because his own taste was just as impeccable as theirs. Watching Jonze videos was like getting a sneak peek inside Spike’s brain, and seeing what got him jazzed.

If “It’s Oh So Quiet” is Jonze doing the musical, with Daft Punk’s “Da Funk” (1997) he reaches the previously virgin shores of drama. As with “California,” Jonze enjoys tweaking his audience, building videos centered on lumbering, unmentioned elephants. There it was a man on fire; here it is a two-sentence thing new to the big city with a dog’s mask for a head. Rather than that disability, or his broken leg, being a primary concern, what actually comes to haunt the video’s protagonist is his ever-present boombox (blasting “Da Funk,” of course), which he is leery (or perhaps incapable) of turning off. Dog-boy Charles wanders the streets of Manhattan, having only recently arrived in the city. He is taunted by some streetwise teenagers (who pause momentarily to concede, “Yo, that’s a good song!”), rejected for a survey of New Yorkers for not being a permanent resident, and ticks off a street vendor for his boombox’s blast. Lonely and unappreciated, he steps into a bodega, following a blond as she does her shopping, and we fear the worst—that Charles, despondent, is set to take out his hostility on this unsuspecting young woman. All fears are alleviated, though, when he goes over and says hello, gently reminding her when she evinces a blank look that he is Charles, her next-door neighbor from adolescence. Thrilled, too, at the reminder of home, she lets loose a steady stream of gab about the folks from back home, and offers to take him downtown to her apartment and cook him dinner. About to board the bus with her, Charles freezes, spotting a “NO RADIOS” sign, and lets the doors shut with him on the outside, leaving his friend, confused, to make the trek home alone.

“Da Funk” takes a commercial gamble by forcing the video’s content upfront, and the song into the background. “Da Funk” believes so thoroughly in its drama that it refuses to yield to the song, its supposed purpose for existence. While ever-present, the Daft Punk song is ultimately little more than mood music for Jonze’s portrait of urban anomic. In so doing, Jonze violates the first commandment of videomaking: Thou Shalt Sell the Song. Playing off the unsettling city symphonies of the New Hollywood 1970s, Jonze sketches a disheartening portrait of urban alienation but caps his work with a comic exclamation mark, like Duchamp drawing a mustache on the Mona Lisa.

Another of Jonze’s preferred clients is the electronica artist Norman Cook, better known by his nom de turntable, Fatboy Slim. Perhaps drawn to the egolossness of electronica, which avoids the video hero-worship inherent to rock and hip-hop, Jonze made two celebrated clips for Fatboy Slim, which, while having little to do with the artist, capture something of his lager-lad, musical standup vibe. “Weapon of Choice” (2001) has become legendary, taking first place in the 2002 VH1 poll of the all-time greatest music videos, but their earlier collaboration “Praise You” (1998) is its superior. In a guerrilla-video setup that would not have been out of place on Jackass, or TV’s Bloopers and Practical Jokes, Jonze and a herd of acolytes swoop down on a West L.A. movie theater, performing an original interpretative dance for unsuspecting moviegoers. Jonze even credits the video to the “Torrance Community Dance Group,” and its erstwhile lead dancer, Richard Koufey (played by Jonze). Jonze, wielding a boombox, leads his troupe of suburban moms and overweight guys in 80s hot pants in their seemingly long-rehearsed performance and, having set off the music-video equivalent of a Happening, records the inevitably hilarious results. Part of the comic punch of “Praise You” is its capturing the caught-on-the-fly, cinema vérité responses of the moviegoing crowd to this outbreak of homegrown goofball. The theater’s manager comes by and shuts off the boombox (prompting Jonze to leap into his arms), and another employee takes it away entirely, but a round of (spontaneous?) boooing allows the Torrance Community Dance Group to finish what they have started. Jonze/Koufey, the most athletic of the bunch, makes an attempt at breakdancing that closely resembles, in its spastic lack of coordination, an epileptic fit. Koufey may be an exceedingly poor dancer, but he is undoubtedly a vigorous one.

The troupe gathers into line for its final number, kicking their legs into the air and swinging their arms over their heads in a wave motion before bowing to applause at song’s end. In a post-song interview, Koufey/Jonze hilariously notes that “a lot of people tell us that we have a very hip-hop vibe. Growing up in Manhattan I performed with several B-boy posses and different groups, so that’s . . . some of our inspiration.” “Praise You” understands that a joke is funniest when its teller doesn’t even crack a smile. Its vérité-style shaky camerawork is also a huge departure from the bulk of the director’s own work, and from the glossy MTV aesthetic, with its sheen of affordable luxury. Jonze, intuitively understanding the rules that govern the music video, repeatedly seeks to undermine them, here and elsewhere. “Praise You” violates the unstated rule of videomaking that a video should always look and sound as
alluring as possible, a gorgeous neverland of beautiful people, lovely commodities, and ravishing settings. “Praise You” is shot on a video camera, features washed-out sound, and generally avoids any gussying-up of its locales and characters, and still works; and as such, serves as an inherent rebuke to the glossy fakeness of most videomaking.

Fatboy Slim’s “Weapon of Choice” is an unremarkable song from an unimpressive album, but Jonze’s video has immortalized it. In the video, a weary business traveler (Christopher Walken) sits, half-dazed with exhaustion, in the overstuffed chair of a hotel lobby. One shudders to think what type of unremitting drudgery could possibly have caused such a sapping of spirit. After a number of seconds of immobile repose, the traveler glances up, as if having heard a far-off sound, too faint to decipher. And indeed, the video’s sound track features a distant clatter that takes some seconds to amalgamate into the song in question. Walken begins to move his head robotically to the faintly sensed sound, then is propelled into standing up and busting a move. His dance step is unfamiliar and lovely, a heretofore unfamiliar mixture of jazz dancing’s elegance and the raider’s solo bustle. Steadily building steam as his dance progresses, he rings the bell at the front desk, dances up, then down, then up the up escalator. Standing at the foot of a typically soulless, repetitive postmodern hotel corridor, the same the world over from Los Angeles to Lisbon to Kuala Lumpur, his response to the ugly design is to unleash a killer cartwheel. If, as Elvis Costello once said, writing about music is like dancing about architecture, then “Weapon of Choice” is some killer rock criticism. As he knows what a bravura performance he is in the midst of turning in, Walken pauses here, slowly extending his finger to call the elevator. Jonze, subverting the set of expectations he has established as this video’s ground rules about what may or may not happen here, injects a wholly surprising and fantastically apropos surrealism, with Walken diving off the ledge of the hotel’s interior hallway, overlooking the lobby, and gracefully flying through the air, swanning his way over to an oversized painting of a nautical scene. He takes a breath there, as if gearing up for even more, and then swoops down to the lobby, landing on his feet and walking over to the chair he had initially been sitting in, returning to the pose of unrelieved exhaustion with which the video had begun. As if the song was a clarion call to action, the video’s protagonist demands action, even in defiance of gravity, during the song’s duration, before returning him unchanged at its end. While on its face a celebration of the musical impetus to change (to dance?), the song ultimately has no long-term impact; the traveler is returned to literally the same pose he began with.

Jonze could straddle both sides of the glossy-versus-vérité debate, and his pair of videos for the Bad Boy royal family of hip-hop are a return to glossiness, although goofy, satirical intent. If kings know that sometimes the best way of maintaining power is hiring a jester to poke fun at your foibles, allowing harmless steam to be let off, so too does Bad Boy CEO Sean “P. Diddy” Combs, who commissioned videos from Jonze for his own “It’s All About the Benjamin’s (Remix)” (1997) and his star Notorious B.I.G.’s posthumous “Sky’s the Limit” (1997).

Both a biting parody of the hip-hop video and a shrewd business maneuver, Jonze’s video for “Sky’s the Limit” offers one potential solution to a problem that dogged hip-hop videomaking in the 90s: how to make a clip for a deceased or otherwise engaged performer? A number of Tupac Shakur’s posthumous videos feature outtakes and other old footage, along with snapshots and other personal memorabilia. “Sky’s the Limit” adopts an entirely different tack, casting dead-on middle school ringers for Biggie and his sidekick Puff Daddy, and setting them loose in the stereotypical world of privilege and consumption that is the hip-hop video. Parodying the way that the 90s hip-hop video was seemingly obsessed with its own wealth, “Sky’s the Limit” opens with a green-tinted shot of a Mercedes pushing its way through a tunnel and joining a posse of luxury cars pulling into the front driveway of a McMansion, complete with faux Greek sculpture on the lawn. Attendants rush up to open the car doors, out step Biggie and Puffy, and the joke becomes clear: everyone here is between ten and thirteen years old. The posse even sit down to watch television, and discover a pint-size Busta Rhymes rapping onscreen. “Sky’s the Limit” takes place in a series of familiar spaces: the Jacuzzi, the club, inside a luxury car. “Biggie” is dressed in note-perfect clothing, imitating his dead mentor in well-tailored pin-stripe suits and garish collared shirts. Walking into the club, Jonze positions the camera at floor level and, for a moment, Biggie and Puffy look almost real. Intent on piercing the illusion of reality, Jonze cuts to eye-level, and the push of screaming fans becomes what it is: a bunch of tittering middle-schoolers surrounding a pair of their contemporaries. There is even a juniors-version Lil’ Kim, complete with red fur hat and red sunglasses, getting dolled up for the big show and telling a friend that she’s “going to get my groove on.”

Jonze, always an astute student of conventions, sends up the hip-hop video with dead-on accuracy in “Sky’s the Limit,” echoing the stinging catalog of the genre’s foibles found in the Roots’ “What They Do” Jonze’s affection for the occasionally silly excesses of the genre is genuine, but “Sky’s the Limit” is also a concession to the business necessities of the music world couched as a soft critique of the industry. Biggie was dead, but the show must go on, and videos must continue down the assembly line toward MTV rollout. Jonze may have offered the most light-hearted solution to Bad Boy’s conundrum, but the result, if studied too closely, remains more than a little ghoulish, like tossing off one-liners at a wake.

“All About the Benjamin’s” crosses genres like Michael Jackson rocking out to “Dirty Diana.” The Bad Boy posse crash a high-school prom and put on a
raucous, impassioned performance for a crowd of tight-assed adolescents in tuxedos and cocktail dresses. The best part of “Benjamins” is seeing well-established hip-hop stars relax and play against type, if only momentarily: Puff Daddy as a pomaded crooner warbling “Everybody Hurts,” Lil’ Kim slow-dancing in a frumpy lavender dress before grabbing the mic and ripping her dress off to reveal a leather bustier and matching pedal pushers. For Jonze, the oft-humorless expanses of the hip-hop video were ripe for an image makeover and an injection of absurdist energy.

Gondry and Jonze were the bridge that connected their moment of arrival—the Alternative Nation–friendly confines of mid-90s MTV—with the blighted, video-unfriendly television landscape that followed. Jonze and Gondry’s restless spirit of innovation would be the inspiration for a cadre of up-and-coming filmmakers who would keep the spirit of the music video alive in the face of a culture no longer fascinated by the form. In that heroic effort, Jonze and Gondry helped lead the way to the contemporary re-emergence of the music video as product of the Internet, virally weaving its way into inboxes and browsers worldwide after being unceremoniously booted from television screens everywhere.

CHAPTER 7

No More Stars

If you turned on MTV anytime starting in the mid-1990s, a striking thing would have happened: in all likelihood, the channel was probably not showing a video. To fans of the early MTV, and the postmodern theorists fascinated by its fragmentary flow of decentered imagery, it may have come as a shock to find Singled Out, The Real World, Daria, or Laguna Beach in its place. MTV had grown up, and left its adolescent infatuation with music behind, as did, to slightly lesser extents, its colleagues VH1, BET, and CMT—all owned by media giant Viacom, and all homogenized and diluted by the impact of ownership by the corporate behemoth. While MTV expanded its reach worldwide, starting channels in Australia, Africa, Brazil, Canada, China, Russia, and Taiwan, among others, the original American channel had almost entirely divested itself of its original purpose for existing—the music video.

With all the airtime formerly given over to music videos now the province of reality TV, animated programs, game shows, and the like, the music video business shrunk accordingly. Record labels realized it was no longer in their interest to spend upward of $100,000 on a video that might never be played. Instead, they chose to adopt a wait-and-see attitude reminiscent of the early years of music video, shooting a video only if a single had already taken hold on radio. Without the support of specialty shows like 120 Minutes (dedicated to alternative music), Headbangers’ Ball (heavy metal), and Amp (electronica), video became the province of stars, established acts, and hopeful debut artists.

Like Hollywood, music video in the late 90s and onward was a polarized affair, with big-budget blockbusters starring big names surrounded by a handful of scrappier upstarts. Music video’s middle ground was lost, as was something in sheer numbers. In the absence of a built-in television audience, music