Since the inception of MTV, certain key information has been burned into the image at the start and end of every music video: the artist's name, the song title, the album title, and the record label. This information remained untouched for the first decade of the channel's existence, but in the early 1990s one additional detail was added to the end of the list: the director's name. Following MTV's lead, all of the other music television channels (VH1, BET, CMT et al.) slowly started adding the director's names to their videos.

What exactly happened in the early 1990s that prompted this small but significant addition to the way that music videos were presented? And what are the consequences of that addition? In this essay I explore a knot of issues involving the auteur, postmodernism, style, genre, and race as played out in this moment of transformation in music video, primarily by looking at how it played out on MTV. I will attempt to disentangle that knot of issues by looking at each thread sequentially. First, I explore the ostensible challenge to auteurism offered by the postmodern fragmentation of the subject (also sometimes termed the "death of the subject"); second, I document the paradoxical reinscription of auteurism in postmodern accounts of the outmoding of individual style (that hallmark of the modernist subject) and its replacement with generic pastiche, elaborating the theoretical consequences of this reinscription; third, I look at the reemergence of style (in a slightly altered form) in hip hop video; fourth, I look at the parallel reemergence of genre (as opposed to the metageneric practice of pastiche) in the hip hop video of the same period; and finally, I assess the theoretical repercussion of this return of style and genre for the theorization of postmodern media culture, focusing on the question of race.
At present there seem to be two general critiques of auteurism in academic circulation. The first, which is presented as part of almost every introductory film text (e.g., Bordwell and Thompson’s widely used Film Art: An Introduction), is the critique of the false analogy between the author of a literary work and the auteur of a film, a critique based on the industrial and collaborative nature of film production.\(^2\) The second critique of auteurism (which derives initially from poststructuralism,\(^3\) and then was adopted and partly retheorized by postmodern theory) requires a more substantial rethinking of the very grounds upon which the notion of authorship (and auteurism by extension) was initially premised: namely, it challenges the fundamental integrity and depth of the subject that was the bedrock of the auteurist myth from the beginning. The postmodern revisions of this challenge insist on the historical component of this theoretical intervention by pointing to the outmoding of the modernist aesthetic valorization of “expression” (the exteriorization of a “deep” interior existence) and its replacement with a kind of surface play. While Bordwell and Thompson’s critique holds out the possibility that we can discern (after a sufficient amount of scrutiny) multiple authorships and consequently multiple styles or signatures in any given film—that is, the various influences of the writer, cinematographer, art director, camera operator, actors, etc. in addition to the director—the poststructuralist/postmodern critique questions both the very consistency of those subjects who influence the final form of the film as well as the associated aesthetic criteria that direct our attention to those people in the first place. That is, this critique assumes a fragmentation of the subject that challenges the presupposition of a coherence of intent both at the moment of the given film’s production and across the individual’s body of work. In addition, the critique points to a new set of aesthetic codes that are no longer invested in the expressivity of a deep subject in any case.

In the following pages, I focus my inquiry on the latter half of this second critique (the more strictly “postmodern” rather than “poststructuralist” problematic). I do so partially to free my study from the literary model of poststructuralism (auteur in lieu of author, style in place of signature), which has historically been the source of a number of problems (not the least of which is the very notion of auteurism). Additionally, however, I choose to focus on the postmodern model to offer a more profoundly historicized context for the understanding of auteurism both as an aesthetic practice and as a part of the more general workings of a cultural logic in transformation.

Of the original postmodern theorists Fredric Jameson has been the most articulate about the transformation of cinematic practice, and it is thus not surprising that his work should also include the clearest elaboration of the nature of postmodern auteurism. Jameson’s essay “Historicism in The Shining” opens with a passage that is overtly concerned with setting up the problematic of genre in postmodern film, to which the essay is devoted, but then it simultaneously sets up an auteurist approach to this question. As he writes, “The most interesting filmmakers today—Robert Altman, Roman Polanski, Nicholas Roeg, Stanley Kubrick—are all in their very different ways practitioners of genre, but in some historically new sense.”\(^4\) This is a deceptively complex sentence, and, upon closer inspection, many aspects of it may seem surprising. The sentence first requires a good deal of unpacking so that the stakes of my eventual interrogation of its contradictions are clearer.

The “historically new sense” in which these filmmakers marshal genre is characterized by a switching between genres, not, as Jameson writes, “as a matter of individual taste, but rather . . . [as the result of objective constraints in the situation of cultural production today.”\(^5\) Jameson thus immediately seizes this genre-jumping from the realm of individual aesthetic choice (and from a subject-based approach) and instead contextualizes it as a symptom of greater cultural shifts. He further elaborates this historical argument through Adorno’s notion of “pastiche.”

Pastiche is differentiated by Adorno (and consequently by Jameson) from parody: while parody “aims at ridiculing and discrediting styles which are still alive and influential,” pastiche “is meant . . . to display the virtuosity of the practitioner rather than the absurdity of the object.”\(^6\)

The aforementioned postmodern auteurs utilize genre in this pastiche mode rather than in the older modernist mode of parody. (Think here of Polanski or Altman’s forays into film noir in Chinatown and The Long Goodbye, respectively. Clearly such a mobilization of pastiche, perhaps in even purer form, is still at work in the recent metageneric efforts of the Coen Brothers, Quentin Tarantino, Robert Rodriguez, and many others.) Jameson’s analysis makes clear the connection between this pastiche mode and the challenge to the subject posed by postmodernism: “As individualism begins to atrophy in a post-industrial world, the
quest for a uniquely distinctive style and the very category of ‘style’ come to seem old-fashioned.” Thus the challenge to subjectivism or individualism is imbricated with (in the consideration of cinema aesthetics) the upheaval of the traditional notion of style (where style is understood in the modernist sense of the unique and characteristic exteriorization [expression] of the subject’s interiority). Three years later when Jameson writes his “Postmodernism” essay, this connection has become a given for him and a ground for the entire theoretical apparatus of postmodernism: “The disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal style, engender the well-nigh universal practice today of... pastiche.”

It should strike us as strange or paradoxical that this postmodern challenge to individualism is articulated through the bodies of work of a handful of individual directors. What are we to make of the fact that some kind of subject persists in the era of postmodern pastiche, and, further, that the theory itself is most easily elaborated by looking at their oeuvres? We might at least provisionally note that Jameson does not mean to endorse these directors as great geniuses as, say, Andrew Sarris would have done for a previous generation of auteurs; it nevertheless remains somewhat of a surprise (and perhaps even a disappointment) that the auteur persists in even this weaker sense under postmodernism.

Since the directors that Jameson points to made their work in a moment of transition (both in the machinery of Hollywood filmmaking and in the cultural logic as the shift from an industrial to a service economy kicked into high gear), we might hypothesize that later forms would work out this contradiction and realize a “pure” pastiche form that is not seen to issue from an individual or group of individuals. The list of auteurs that Jameson enumerates could be taken, if it proves to be the case, as a vanguard of such a mass-cultural movement (with the persistence of the auteur in this first moment merely a residuum from high modernist aesthetics). This nonauteurist deployment of pastiche has not, however, arrived in cinema where the directors I name above (the Coen Brothers, Tarantino, et al.) are already entering a number of different film-historical canons. We can see this in a (semi-)popular canon, for example, with the inclusion of Fargo and Pulp Fiction on the American Film Institute’s list of the 100 greatest American films. In an academic context, a 1998 volume titled The New American Cinema elevates Tarantino to equal status with Spielberg and Hitchcock in terms of the number of mentions each receives in the collection.

Given this failure of cinema to rupture the auteur-pastiche nexus, it seems logical to think that television might be a more appropriate location to begin the search for nonauteurist pastiche since television has historically been taken to be profoundly anti-auteurist. When the discourse of the auteur is marshaled in discussions of television, it is almost invariably through the figure of the producer and not the director that this unity is assumed (e.g., Stephen Bochco, Aaron Spelling, Steven J. Cannell). The rare counterexamples (e.g., David Lynch’s Twin Peaks for which, interestingly, he wasn’t even the sole director) or the Tarantino-directed episode of E.R.) simply prove the rule. Here I specifically want to look for the transformation of auteurism on MTV, supposedly one of the most postmodern of the televisial formats.

If we look historically at MTV’s origins, it would seem that the network was in its early years profoundly anti-auteurist. While major directors frequently directed videos in the early days of MTV (Ridley Scott, Spike Lee, Herb Ritts, Martin Scorsese, et al.), their signatures were erased by the overwhelming focus on the musical performers themselves in a way that would not occur when such directors worked with Hollywood superheroes (e.g., Ridley Scott’s auteurial persona manages to survive Harrison Ford’s presence in Blade Runner, and Martin Scorsese’s signature can even coexist with Leonardo DiCaprio in Gangs of New York and The Aviator). As I mentioned at the start of this essay, in those early days of the cable network the directors’ names were not even included in the clip identification information presented at the start and end of each video, thereby furthering the emphasis on the performer over the director and effectively erasing the question of individual directorial style.

However, while the director was missing in early MTV, so was the overwhelming presence of metageneric pastiche that has now become one of its trademarks. It is by now an academic commonplace to note the historical transformation in music video from a performance-driven medium (wherein shots of the musicians lip-synching predominate) to a more “narrative” (and, I would add, genre-driven) form. While I will not elaborate the entire parameters of the early MTV aesthetic, suffice it to say that while it had a recognizable style—all-white sets shot markedly overexposed and often with a good deal of fog, frontal shots of the performers in that proscenium space, frequent use of futuristic or vaguely
science fictional elements in the mise-en-scène—this was certainly a far cry from the postmodern pastiche mode. (Interestingly, the Stone Temple Pilots’s “Big Bang Baby” video [1995] is actually a pastiche of this early MTV-style, harkening back most directly to the clip for the J. Geils Band’s single “Freeze Frame.”)

However, as MTV “matured” and new narrative/generic forms emerged, we see a coincident emergence of both pastiche and the auteur on MTV, echoing the paradoxical auteurist origins of the notion of cinematic pastiche in Jameson’s writings. While there is no radical moment of rupture, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw a major transformation of MTV on a number of fronts. All of these related changes collectively represent an aesthetic (and ultimately theoretical) upheaval of the channel’s format related to and bespeaking a coincident transformation in the cultural logic.

One of these many changes that came in the early 1990s was the inclusion of the names of the directors in the burn that frame every video. With the inclusion of this information that for so long had seemed inessential, MTV allowed for (or perhaps even called into being) the development of the music video as an auteurist medium. This auteurist tendency has continued to intensify, and not simply through the increasing name recognition prompted by repeated exposure to the information framing the video’s presentation. One typical high-profile celebration of the music video auteur came in 1995, as MTV’s The Week in Rock ran a feature on the body of work by the professional skateboarder turned music video auteur Spike Jonze. Jonze’s video work includes Weezer’s “Buddy Holly,” which is made to look like an episode of Happy Days complete with recontextualized footage of the Fonzie, Richie, and the gang; Elastica’s “Car Song” as a futuristic thriller combining elements of Blade Runner and Japanese monster films; Beck’s “Devil’s Haircut,” which cites the early 1970s detective film complete with zooms on grainy freeze frames of the star wandering through Chinatown (apparently) performed on that beloved film technology of the 1970s, the optical printer; Björk’s “It’s Oh So Quiet” as an elaborate homage to the Hollywood musical; and the Beastie Boys’s “Sabotage,” perhaps Jonze’s best known and most circulated video, which is a dense collage of allusions to the 1970s rogue cop films and TV shows like Bullitt, Starsky and Hutch, Kojak, and Dirty Harry. (This list of pastiche videos helmed by one of MTV’s pioneering auteurs should already begin to suggest a strong link between the emergent auteurism and the pastiche mode on that channel.)

The directors also found a place in the MTV Music Video Awards as key categories were set up simply to celebrate their efforts (both in awards for individual videos and for their body of work), rather than simply the achievements of the musical performers. In fact, one of the most legendary moments from MTV Music Video Award history (which still gets reaired on MTV fairly frequently as part of the network’s constant narration of its own history) occurred at the 1994 awards ceremony when Jake Scott, the director for R.E.M.’s video “Everybody Hurts,” was awarded best director in a music video over Spike Jonze for “Sabotage.” Beastie Boy Adam Yauch (a.k.a. MCA), clad as his alter-ego Nathaniel Hornblower, stormed the stage and took the mic to decry the travesty of not giving the award to Spike Jonze.14

Perhaps the crowning moment for MTV auteurism (or at least a pinnacle in the recognition of MTV as an auteurist medium) was MTV’s Top 50 of All Time (“all time” being understood here with proper televsional myopia to include the less than two decades of MTV’s existence at that
point), which aired in November 1997. Not only did this historical narration allow MTV to correct its oversight by appending directors’ names to a number of videos that had formerly not fallen under the rubric of the auteur (although some remained notably lacking, presumably because MTV was unable to retrieve that long-ignored information), but it additionally gave MTV the chance to highlight the great achievements of the music video form. One of the primary ways in which MTV bolstered the prestigious roll call of great music videos was by including interviews with the directors of the videos. The interviewees included Samuel Bayer (director of videos for Blind Melon’s “No Rain” and Nirvana’s “Smells like Teen Spirit”), Wayne Isham (director of clips for Bon Jovi’s “Want Dead or Alive” and Def Leppard’s “Pour Some Sugar on Me”), Mark Pellington (helmsman on Pearl Jam’s “Jeremy” video), and, of course, Spike Jonze (whose “Sabotage” charted at number 31). Notably, this list includes no directors from early MTV, and only one (Isham) from the transitional period of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In fact, Isham was used in his interview to periodize MTV and to represent the passage (referred to in the course of the interview as the “middle period of MTV”) to its third (read: mature, auteurist) period.15

Perhaps the greatest proof in this countdown that MTV has become a profoundly auteurist medium is that the video for the Whitney Houston song “I Will Always Love You” (the theme from the feature film The Bodyguard) is credited to Alan Smithee, the pseudonym that has traditionally served as refuge for directors wishing to disavow their work on feature films. The fact that this nom de plume has finally found its way to music video suggests, first, the amount of attention called to the director (so that someone could be sufficiently defensive as to have recourse to that pseudonym), and, second, the necessity of the director’s name in the medium (lest there be an obvious absence where the director’s name would normally be). At present, the names of music video directors like Spike Jonze, Mark Romanek, Stephane Sednaoui, Roman Coppola, Jonathan Dayton, Valerie Faris, and others are, if not household names, at least widely circulated testimonials to the newfound auteurist biases of the form.

The simultaneous emergence of pastiche (signaled above in the list of Spike Jonze’s directorial credits) is equally remarkable. While the videos of MTV’s early and middle periods first ignored and then struggled with narrative and generic forms, the videos of the third period have routinely and deftly mobilized the metageneric play of pastiche. The so-called alternative music (which began to dominate the charts and the airwaves after 1991, the legendary “year that punk broke”) was the music of choice for the emergent MTV pastiche mode.

The Top 10 of All Time alternative videos list from MTV’s series that aired in late 1997 and was rebroadcast throughout the first half of 1998 bespeaks this connection between alternative music and the pastiche mode. Here I will limit my comments to the top five videos, which should amply demonstrate this connection. Number five is the aforementioned Spike Jonze–helmed video for the Beastie Boys’s “Sabotage” which is an homage to the tradition of Dirty Harry et al. Number four is the video for the Smashing Pumpkins’s “Tonight, Tonight,” a lush, almost shot-for-shot re-creation of Georges Melies’s “Trip to the Moon” directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris. Number three is the video for Nine Inch Nails song “Closer” directed by Mark Romanek, one of the earliest MTV auteurs whose work won him a lifetime achievement award at the MTV music video awards in 1997. The video for “Closer” was instrumental in the resuscitation of the primitive cinema look with all of its material marks of age and of the very materiality of film (scratches, visible cuts, etc.), which has now become one of the primary markers of youth (cultural) marketing. This video is, though, a double or second-order pastiche (i.e., a pastiche of a pastiche); while its style harks back to primitive cinema, it makes that return via the more immediate stylistic referent of the photography of Joel-Peter Witkin, an artist who became known in the 1980s for his (pastiche) re-creations of early medical photography, specifically the early photographic representation of aberrant bodies (midgets, hermaphrodites, amputees, etc.). Number two on the list is the video for “Under the Bridge” by the Red Hot Chili Peppers—a video that focuses primarily on the guitarist playing in a desert and the singer (Anthony Keidis) walking around Los Angeles while singing, but also includes a bizarre sequence of Keidis running in slow motion away from the distant mushroom cloud of a presumed nuclear explosion. At number one, of course, is Nirvana, the band that is generally credited with initiating the alternative revolution. The video for their breakthrough single “Smells Like Teen Spirit” portrays a pep rally gone awry as the seemingly well-behaved boys and girls are roused into a frenzy of moshing by the end of the video. Of these top five, three are clear pastiches with definite historical/stylistic referents (“Sabotage,” “Tonight,
Tonight,” and “Closer”), while one (“Smells Like Teen Spirit”) has elements of pastiche but is much less completely structured around them, and only one (“Under the Bridge”) contains few moments that hint at a generic form. (It should also be noted that all five of these videos were directed by well-known music video auteurs.)

These pastiches and the alternative subgenre with which they are most closely associated have assumed a place of preeminence in the canon of 1990s music video, thus echoing Jameson’s enshrinement of cinematic pastiche. Alternative music has been canonized by MTV and various other rock(ist) institutions as the music of the early 1990s (while, presumably, hip hop stands poised to be its successor in historical accounts of the late 1990s). This central import of alternative was marked by MTV when the network offered it as the final top 10 list on the weekend when all of the lists were first broadcast back to back. The top 10 alternative list thus plays (according to the countdown logic of the program) somewhat like the top 10. Further highlighting MTV’s valuation of alternative music video is the fate of such videos on the network’s Top 50 of All Time, which included five such videos in the top twenty-five (including “Smells Like Teen Spirit” at number one, displacing “Thriller” after better than a decade of dominance).

Thus it would appear that at least on MTV not only does the emergence of a “well nigh universal” practice of pastiche coincide with a new type of auteurism (as it does in cinema), but that its emergence actually seems to play a crucial role in establishing the very existence of auteurism. It is important to stress again that although these two tendencies (toward auteurism and toward pastiche) evolve contemporaneously, they are (at least in theory) antithetical, with the one marking the dispersal of the subject and the other celebrating its unity. If, contrary to this apparent contraction, however, these two practices are ultimately interrelated, it would seem to demand a reevaluation or supplementing of the discourse on the “death of the subject” that has dominated theory since the early poststructuralist critiques better than two decades ago. Even if the subject is hollowed out under postmodernism, it doesn’t simply go away—rather, it persists as an anchor for interpretation (even Jameson’s own), as some kind of guarantor of coherence (even if merely the new kind of schizophrenic coherence suggested by pastiche’s genre-jumping), and as a signifier in the marketplace (perhaps the greatest reason that it has not simply disappeared along with the other relics of modernist aesthetics). While this is not a devastating critique, we certainly need to offer a more nuanced accounting for the ways in which the auteur (or a kind of auteur) persists and, indeed, appears inextricably coupled with the practice of pastiche.

There is a second set of questions that I want to explore here, and this set might just be more critical than the first. From the pages above, it might seem that Jameson is right to point to the “well nigh universal” practice of pastiche, but that universality becomes less apparent when we expand our scope to include the work of other directors as well as videos in other musical genres. In light of this I want to retrace the trajectory above (first through Jameson, then through music video) to look at the logic of the object choices in that theorization and to look at what gets excluded in that first act of choosing. Asking these questions may prove to be not just a significant critique of postmodern theory, but also might give us some purchase on the future of the globalized U.S.-led cultural logic.

I want to return to the first sentence of Jameson’s initial attempts to elaborate the notion of pastiche: “The most interesting filmmakers today—Robert Altman, Roman Polanski, Nicholas Roeg, Stanley Kubrick—are all in their very different ways practitioners of genre, but in some historically new sense.” The main question I wish to raise is what subtends Jameson’s assessment (in Kantian terms, his aesthetic judgment) that these four directors are in fact the “most interesting filmmakers.” Given the now commonplace critiques of Kant whereby aesthetic judgments that pretend to universality rest ultimately on con-
tingent grounds, such an aesthetic claim is both startling and untenable.²³ The point of this interrogation is not simply to take Jameson to task for his oversight or overvaluation of this or that director; the point, rather, is that the selection of any director as “most interesting” is far from neutral and has major repercussions for the theoretical framework that he develops. The problems of this contingent assertion are in turn reproduced in the writings of those (numerous) scholars who have relied on the postmodern notion of pastiche (e.g., Vivian Sobchack’s final chapter in Screening Space or Anne Friedberg’s Window Shopping).²⁴ Therefore, this critique is not a quarrel with an isolated moment in a specific text, but rather a necessary intervention in the entire discourse of postmodern visual culture.

We can begin in less theoretical terms to call Jameson’s evaluation into question by noting that there is not even a consensus that the auteurs that he enumerates are the “most interesting.” While Jameson’s discussion of these postmodern auteurs has been widely influential, it certainly has not foreclosed the emergence of other lists (or canons). For example, in Kenneth von Gunden’s book titled, appropriately enough, Postmodern Auteurs,²⁵ he designates the group of filmmakers (Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Martin Scorsese, Brian DePalma) who are often called the “film generation” or the “film brats” as the titular “postmodern auteurs.” While von Gunden’s notion of the postmodern (which appears to be synonymous with “the contemporary”) may give us pause, his list still clearly amounts to an assessment that these are “the most interesting filmmakers today.” This list of directors (which seems to have established itself more fully as the canon of New American Cinema in film studies discourse [as attested to by the sometimes troublingly auteurist collection, The New American Cinema²⁶]) seems to tap more immediately into both the middle-brow industry prestige of Academy awardees and the breadwinning, mass-cultural auteurs whose names have become fodder for commercial strategies. Jameson himself offers no other “proof” or defense of the “interest” of the directors on his own list than the fact that they practice genre in some historically new sense.

So, what are the criteria that subtend his aesthetic judgment? It ultimately appears that the choice of his specific list of auteurs is in some profound sense circular or tautological; that is, his judgment proceeds from his then-unformulated postmodern theoretical agenda so that the films and directors that fit in with that emergent conceptual field are “the most interesting.” In other words, what Jameson finds “interesting” in these directors is perhaps their confirmation of his theoretical impulses that would later be formulated as postmodernism. One question that then arises (a question that I will defer until the end of the chapter) is what greater cultural or social interests are served by this validation of pastiche. This question may also be posed as a hypothetical: What would the cultural logic look like if we took as our point of departure not these (still arguably high cultural) practitioners of pastiche, but rather, to choose a pointed example, the blaxploitation directors such as Gordon Parks and Melvin van Peebles? Certainly the work of the blaxploitation directors has had a major impact on the shape of American cinema in the 1970s and beyond, largely in the films of Quentin Tarantino and his bevy of imitators who explicitly draw on these films. Thus we might well argue that they are the “most interesting” directors of that period in the 1970s when Jameson was first articulating his theory of pastiche. Or, to take a slightly less loaded example, how might our vision of the cultural logic change if we started with two of the most commercially significant filmmakers of the past thirty years, Spielberg and Lucas, both of whom are mentioned in Jameson’s writings but who do not occupy a central position in his theorization of pastiche?²⁷

A similar set of problems and exclusion happens within the realm of music video. The enshrinement by MTV of pastiche videos seems to echo Jameson’s own (and it is no more explicit about its reasons for doing so). While the now canonical alternative music movement was accompanied by the co-emergence of auteurism and pastiche on MTV, other musical genres have been much slower to follow in its footsteps (if they have followed at all).

One of MTV’s desires is to erase the heterogeneity of its musical forms in order to offer (or to appear to offer) the greatest good to the greatest number, but in fact a remarkable elision takes place in its canonization of alternative video pastiche. Almost no other genre has devoted itself wholeheartedly to pastiche in the way that alternative has done (or did). One of the most notable exceptions to the purported hegemony of pastiche is found in hip hop music, which is the primary rival to alternative (or, if we dare say it, “postalternative”) music for the limited airtime for
The origins of a style: stills from Hype Williams’s groundbreaking videos for "Woo Ha (Got You All in Check)" and "The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)."

These hip hop videos tend to be much less frequently pastiche driven than are their alternative counterparts. Interestingly, auteurism has emerged in the postalternative era in hip hop with such figures as Hype Williams, Paul Hunter, Lionel C. Martin, et al., but these auteurs have rarely had recourse to the pastiche mode. It is to the model presented by the work of some of these auteurs who don’t rely on pastiche that I now turn.

The aesthetic of hip hop video in the late 1990s was largely marked (almost to the point of caricature) by the productions of one of its most distinct stylists, Hype Williams (and I use “style” here pointedly to gesture to what appears at first glance to be a modernist type of aesthetic production that was assumed vanquished with the omnipresence of pastiche). Williams’s signature style was primarily introduced through two early videos (for Busta Rhymes’s “Woo Ha [Got You All in Check]” and Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliot’s “The Rain [Supa Dupa Fly]”). In 1997 and 1998 Williams’s videos were almost inescapable. This aesthetic is primarily characterized by the use of extreme wide-angle and fish-eye lenses; highly reflective (metallic or wet) surfaces; luminous objects in the frame (neon, incandescent, and fluorescent bulbs); jerky, stop-and-start motion created by shooting at high frame rates with the actors moving slowly and accentuated by ramping up and down the speed of playback; symmetrical and/or circular sets; costume and set design in bold primary colors creating a number of specifically colored environments; and the intercutting among a series of these colored environments within a single video. While Williams’s style of music video does partake of Jameson’s “cult of the glossy image,” which he identifies later in “Historicism in The

Nearly identical stills from Mase’s "Feel So Good" and the (almost instantaneous) Monster Magnet pastiche—or is it vice versa?

Shining” as one of the other defining characteristics of postmodern visual production, clearly this form does not represent the epitome of pastiche that we saw in alternative music video.

As a testament to the currency of this style (and to its status as a style), there are now videos that are not simply imitations but actual pastiches of the Hype Williams style. Notable in this regard is the video for the heavy metal band Monster Magnet’s single “Space Lord.” It begins as a pastiche of Metallica’s “The Unforgiven” but after a minute it abruptly shifts modes and becomes a pastiche of the Hype Williams–helmed video for Mase’s “Feel So Good.” (The pastiche was so “successful” in re-creating the object that Monster Magnet’s frontman confessed [on the MTV program Artist’s Cut] that upon seeing the Mase video a friend mistakenly called him to let him know that his video was airing.) Similar although less sustained pastiches of his style have also appeared in commercials for Sprite, Nintendo, and Mountain Dew. This style has also been parodied in an Arizona Jeans commercial in which a group of teenagers dismiss the dominant modes (styles) of contemporary youth marketing (of which the Hype Williams style is one of three) by demanding that companies just “show us the jeans.” The existence of such clear citations of the Hype Williams style bespeaks its availability as a distinct signature rather than simply another postmodern appropriation, and thus it makes clear its difference from the model of auteurist pastiche that is purportedly “universal” under postmodernism.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of this distinction between Williams’s style and the alternative pastiches discussed above is the Spike Jonze–helmed video for “Sky’s the Limit” by the Notorious B.I.G. That video,
produced posthumously for B.I.G. by Sean "Puffy" Combs who heads the Bad Boy label on which B.I.G.'s recordings appeared, is a full-blown pastiche of the Hype Williams signature. In the booklet that accompanies Jonze's Director's Series DVD, he explains that they even hired someone for the shoot to give it the "Bad Boy look," which he clarifies is "Money. Flash... The shine." This, of course, is shorthand for the signature style of Hype Williams, who directed the bulk of the videos for the Bad Boy label during the period when Jonze's video was made.

Unlike others who adapted the Williams style to make knock-off videos, Jonze is explicit about the metageneric status of his effort. The video features a pair of twelve-year-old look-alikes playing the roles of B.I.G. and Puffy. Jonze says in the same Director's Series interview that the concept for the video came from his then-wife Sofia Coppola. "Basically it's like Bugsy Malone, which was one of her favorite movies when she was a kid. It's all kids 12 and under, Scott Baio, and I think Jodie Foster, but it's a gangster movie from the 1930s." So Jonze unabashedly recognizes not only that the concept is borrowed from another film (Bugsy Malone), but he also knows full well that that film itself is a pastiche of an earlier genre. While the "Sky's the Limit" video replaces the gangsters with gangstas, it is otherwise as pure a pastiche as any on the list enumerated above. And as if that second-order pastiche were not already enough, Jonze includes in the mise-en-scène of his video a television set on which a pastiche of Hype Williams's groundbreaking "Woo Ha (Got You All in Check)" is acted out by a diminutive Busta Rhymes doppelganger. Nothing could have provided a clearer illustration of the different modes in which Spike Jonze and Hype Williams have made their names than does this video.

We might well try imagining the reverse as a final proof of the fundamental difference between the work of these two directors: what would a pastiche of a Spike Jonze video look like? It might be possible to imagine a pastiche of a single video of his (just as he can imagine a pastiche of Bugsy Malone), but there is no unified style from video to video that would allow us to re-create the "Spike Jonze look" as he re-creates the "Bad Boy look" in the "Sky's the Limit" video. It thus seems clear that if Spike Jonze confirms Jameson's analysis of pastiche, Hype Williams demands a complication of it.

While it was momentarily useful to view the Williams signature as (modernist) style without further elaboration, that was merely a starting point. For while Williams does have a quotable look, this is surely far from the expressive style of Edvard Munch's The Scream, which Jameson uses as one of the emblems of modernist style. Here we are no longer in the world of the deep expressions of anomic that characterized the productions of modernism, but rather in some new form of postmodern style (a seemingly paradoxical term) where the individual persists as a surface look, available as a commodity more than as a worldview. So this returns us closer to pastiche, where the auteur paradoxically persists largely as a way to differentiate products. And while the "aesthetic exhaustion" that characterizes pastiche seems not to plague Hype Williams, he certainly revels in the glossiness of his images as much as the most ironic of the alternative auteurs. Thus in the text above I seek not to jettison postmodern theory as an attempt to understand hip hop video, but rather I aim to suggest supplements and footnotes to that theory reflecting the unforeseen mutations within postmodernism that hip hop effects. In short, style (in the historically new form we see in the Hype Williams videos) appears not to be antithetical to postmodernism after
all, but neither is it fully explained by the extant texts of postmodern theory.

Lest we reduce hip hop video to the work of Hype Williams, we should also note that there are some hip hop videos that do appear (again, at least at first glance) to mobilize the pastiche mode. But even when they do offer something that might be loosely considered pastiche, there are remarkable differences between them and the alternative pastiches discussed above. For example, when hip hop video has assumed this general mode of pastiche, the stylistic referent is more likely to be a recent popular form than the more rarefied, often high-cultural allusions cited above in alternative videos.35 The privileged referent for hip hop video of late is the 1980s action blockbuster. This aesthetic is summoned by any number of videos, many of which rank among MTV’s pantheon of the hip hop genre. To offer only a few examples of hip hop video’s approach to this form of appropriation, the video for the Notorious B.I.G.’s “Hypnotize” centers on two high-speed chases in the Florida Keys that seem to echo Miami Vice (the first is comprised of a number of helicopters chasing a yacht, and the second includes motorcycles and a humvee pursuing B.I.G. and Puffy in a convertible); the Fugees’ “Ready or Not” includes similar chases on jet skis, in a submarine, and on motorcycles through a jungle terrain; and Puff Daddy’s “Been around the World” (in which Puffy plays an international playboy/secret agent à la James Bond) adds a desert chase sequence.36 I should also point out that the allusion is performed not merely in the recitation of the plot but also is summoned through a number of other stylistic techniques. For example, with the exception of “Dangerous” all of the above videos are letterboxed, thereby connoting the widescreen theatrical experience. Frequently these videos also feature momentary suspensions of the song as certain elements of their narratives play out. For example, in “Hypnotize” the song stops for forty-five seconds as the scene shifts from sea to land and a new chase begins. (Interestingly, in this last sequence when B.I.G.’s song drops out a more generically theatrical instrumental score kicks in—one that is not featured on the CD version of the track.) This practice of suspending the song for a more narrative or cinematic moment has quickly become somewhat of a cliché itself.

As the Hype Williams videos seem to point to a certain resilience of style in hip hop video, the presence of these hip hop imitations of the Hollywood blockbuster may be pointing to the persistence of genre (rather than “metagene”) as an active category. In other words, these videos position themselves not so much as allusions or recapitulations but as new additions to the blockbuster cycle.37 Their transformations of the generic codes can be seen primarily in the recasting of the leads with black heroes (something that would have never happened in the 1980s films where the black buddy was either killed off, contained, or effectively domesticated).38 Instead of “celebrating the virtuosity of the practitio-
nor,” these videos seem to be celebrating the merits of the genre: that is, the “coolness” of the blockbuster as a visual form. So this reinvigoration of genre seems to be more about how great the actual form of the blockbuster is and about (re)creating the actual affect of the original than either the ironic homage of the Beastie Boys’s “Sabotage” or of the virtuoso and aestheticizing re-creations of “Closer” or “Tonight, Tonight.”

Finally I want to turn my attention here to what, precisely, is at stake in this difference between the form of alternative pastiche videos and of these divergent forms of hip hop videos that I have outlined above. Basically the stakes are these: pastiche (in its pure [read: white cultural] form) appears to be profoundly premised upon the mastery and manipulation of what has, following the work of Pierre Bourdieu, come to be known as cultural capital.37 While the music video may be a popular form, the kinds of aesthetic allusion made in the alternative pastiches are frequently far from it; the intimate knowledge of the style of primitive cinema, of Melies’s shorts, or of Witkin’s photographs clearly bespeak a certain position within a cultural elite and an inculcation in a
certain type of knowledge culture. As noted above, when hip hop has approached the pastiche mode, the stylistic referent is more likely a recent popular form such as the 1980s action blockbuster. So if the mastery of a rarefied cultural capital ultimately subtends the valuation of the pastiche mode (both in music video and in cinematic auteurism [where the recent films of the latest wave of auteurs including the Coen Brothers et al. seem to confirm this hypothesis]), then this begins to throw into question the cultural politics of theories of the postmodern since such mastery is deeply linked to class (which itself, especially in the United States, is profoundly linked to race). The “most interesting” directors today turn out to be (not surprisingly) well-educated, middle- or upper-class white males who come equipped with a familiarity with historical forms be-speaking that class and educational status. At one level, Jameson’s diagnosis of a cultural dominant derived from the aesthetic production of a white cultural elite was bound to be “accurate”: despite the increasing presence of other voices in culture, there is still clearly a (residual?) hegemony enjoyed by the white middle and upper classes. But this again approaches tautology — these people are the privileged symptoms of the cultural dominant because they are in a position to dominate the evaluation of culture. Staying within the confines of such a theory or (worse yet) beginning to celebrate the cultural production of those privileged classes ultimately plays a part in reinforcing that hegemony by mobilizing the theorist’s own cultural capital and position of cultural authority to draw attention to and to canonize such works without examining the reasons that subtend such an evaluation.

As I cautioned in my remarks on Hype Williams above, I do not want this critique to be taken as a call to abandon the understanding of the globalized U.S. cultural dominant gained through postmodern theory. On the contrary, what seems necessary (and I recognize that this represents nothing more than a first gesture in that direction, which must be played out more fully elsewhere) is a theory that presents an exploration of multiple cultural logics that is not simply derived from the aesthetic production of a white cultural elite. Such an exploration would provide a necessary supplement to Jameson’s useful diagnosis of the state of the cultural dominant. Developing the models embodied by the reinvigoration of style in Hype Williams’s videos and of genre in other hip hop videos is one possible avenue for the exploration of such alternative cultural logics. And as we develop these other logics we will no doubt be forced to reconsider further our decades of trumpeting the “death of the author” and of our general theoretical understanding of a postmodern model developed without considering these other forms of contemporary cultural production.

NOTES

1 Director’s names are now only missing for those rare repeated videos from the 1980s for which presumably no record exists of who directed the clips. As of 2004 the relatively new Fuse channel (formerly MuchMusic USA) was the only major music video channel in the United States that did not include the director’s name. On CMT the director’s name is offered at the start of the video and then is replaced with the songwriter’s name at the end. This substitution of one “author” for another is incredibly suggestive. To fully tease out the meaning of that substitution would require, however, a much more extended analysis of the “force field” of country music than I have space for here.


5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid. Note that the term “post-industrial” is one that Jameson abandons in favor of “global” or “multinational” as he develops his theory of postmodernism.


10 Of course, the “postmodernism” of MTV has also been challenged, most notably in Andrew Goodwin’s Dancing in the Distraction Factory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). While Goodwin’s objections are often important in reining in the hyperbolic excesses of some postmodern writings on the cable network, even he ultimately concedes that there is much about MTV that is postmodern.

11 This period also, and I would argue not unrelatedly, saw the meteoric rise
(and, shortly thereafter, the fall) of the so-called alternative music of R.E.M., Nirvana, et al.

12 A connection could be made between MTV auteurism and the emergence of the politique des auteurs where each medium (film, music video) strives for respectability (despite its commercial and industrial nature) by aspiring to the higher status of an established cultural form. In fact, the gesture on the part of MTV was no doubt meant to latch onto not the prestigious notion of the literary author, but to the now-institutionalized notion of the auteur of the feature film.

13 It is of special significance here that Jonze, unlike the cinematic auteurs who tried their hands at music video in the 1980s (Scorsese, Ridley Scott, et al.), made his name primarily through directing videos. Thus MTV's celebration of his career is in many ways a celebration of its own place in the fostering and promoting of that new art form.

14 Nathaniel Hornblower, in addition to being the persona adopted for this “anonymous” prank, is also, suggestively, the pseudonym under which Yauch directs some of the Beastie Boys's videos. The footage of this stunt has now even made it onto his Director's Label DVD, The Work of Director Spike Jonze (2003). This DVD series, created by Jonze and fellow video directors Michel Gondry and Chris Cunningham, is a testimony to the continued importance of the auteur in music video years after its emergence, which I outline above.

15 This enshrinement of directors is no quirk of just this one countdown. Two years later when MTV unveils yet another iteration of their Top 100 videos (of all time—this time apparently closing out the millennium), the program includes interstitial segments highlighting the work of a number of music video auteurs: Spike Jonze, Mark Romanek, Wayne Isham, Hype Williams, David Fincher, and the husband-and-wife team of Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris.

16 It is unclear at what point this video was attributed to Alan Smith, since, as I pointed out, MTV has frequently gone back to correct their earlier failure to include director's names. In any case, it is clear that by the time this countdown aired, the director's name had become de rigueur.

17 Since this alternative movement has now been more or less officially declared to be over, this canon of alternative videos—now safely tucked away as a historical movement—should prove to be a relatively stable indicator of the fate of those videos for the ages. That said, many of these videos have slipped further down MTV's more recent countdowns as the station and its viewers have become less immediately enchanted with the alternative music revolution.

18 The awarding of the top spot to "Smells Like Teen Spirit" should serve as a salutary reminder that these are music videos. While my focus here has been on the visual aspect (i.e., the "video"), this appears to be a case where the musico-historical import of the song is as significant as (if not more significant than) the accompanying visual presentation in the assessment of its merits. While this video is certainly memorable, it isn't quite the tour de force that some of the other clips on the countdown are. In other words, this video had to be number one on the countdown because of the place of the song in the history of alternative music, rather than (as is largely the case with the other videos) as a reflection of an act of aesthetic judgment about the video per se.

19 Although the "Under the Bridge" video is not a pastiche, it is most assuredly still auteurist since it was directed by the indie cinema auteur Gus Van Sant. Indeed, we might argue that it is his external credibility as a director that allows him to eschew the dominant pastiche form, or that his preexisting cinematic style determines the form of this video more than does the music televisual context in which it is placed.

20 Cf. the decade-ending tributes to Nirvana on the covers of both Spin and Rolling Stone.

21 We might well trace the ways that pastiche and auteurism have played out on other music television channels such as VH1, BET, CMT, and MTV2 as well as on Internet sites like MTV.com and Launch.com. While these other sites have followed MTV's lead in crediting the music video directors, they have not followed the movement to pastiche with equal zeal. I address this issue in further detail below.

22 The language of the "death of the subject" has found new life lately as one of the catchphrases of the emergent discourse of the posthuman.

23 For one exploration of this "contingency of value," see the work of Jameson's colleague Barbara Herrnstein Smith in her Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

24 Vivian Sobchack, Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Anne Friedberg, Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). These are just two of innumerable examples of texts that rely on Jameson's elaboration of the notion of pastiche.


27 Only Lucas's early American Graffiti (1973) is mentioned in conjunction with the notion of pastiche. Spielberg is altogether absent. Certainly some of their work would merely confirm his observations (e.g., the Spielberg/Lucas collaborations on the Indiana Jones films that draw heavily upon 1930s serials), but others have a more obscure connection to it (e.g., Jaws). Since Jameson has marked the importance of this last film through his lengthy reading of it elsewhere (namely in "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" in Signatures of the Visible), its absence here is especially interesting.
We might equally point to country music video as a genre with incredible popularity and little use of pastiche. Mark Fenster’s essay “Genre and Form” starts to lay the groundwork for this, but we would certainly want also to look closely at CMT and the discourse surrounding these videos. See Fenster, “Genre and Form: The Development of the Country Music Video,” in Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader, ed. Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin, and Lawrence Grossberg (New York: Routledge, 1993).

Note that this also represents a shift in my focus from MTV as a specific set of discourses surrounding music videos to the music videos themselves.

Later I problematize the simple assertion that this reemergence of style is just a return of the modernist model. However, at this point I wish only to unsettle the postmodern problematic.


Interview by Mark Lewman in The Work of Director Spike Jonze. We might note quickly here the resonance between Jonze’s language in describing the Williams/Bad Boy look and Jameson’s phrase “the cult of the glossy image.”

Hype Williams has also directed videos that are more simply pastiche videos (e.g., Missy Elliot’s “Sock It 2 Me,” the follow up to “The Rain,” which is a Japanimation-influenced space saga, and Dr. Dre and 2Pac Shakur’s “California Love,” which directly echoes Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome). However, Williams’s name is more immediately identified with the other style I described above that became such a marker of hip hop video in the second half of the 1990s.

Interestingly, this form of hip hop video with a revitalized interest in genre is, at least in its first period, allied with a single auteur—namely, Paul Hunter. This connection between auteur and genre, though, is a more familiar paradox that dates back to the emergence of the politique des auteurs. The difference here is that rather than expressing himself through genre, Paul Hunter’s signature is genre.

Of course, as I preliminarily suggested in an earlier footnote, none of these binary classifications should be taken as rigid or absolute. Hip hop has certainly seen some videos that are more referential and/or ironic in their mobilization of the 1980s blockbuster: e.g., the video for “Dangerous” by Busta Rhymes casts him as the crazy white cop in a buddy flick (after Riggs from the Lethal Weapon movies) and also includes a brief sequence with Busta playing the karate master from The Last Dragon. Some have also had references that are as “high cultural” as their alternative counterparts: for example, Stanley Kubrick is alluded to both in the video for Usher’s “My Way” (derived from the opening sequences of A Clockwork Orange) and that for Mystikal’s “Shake Ya Ass” (which cites the party scene in Eyes Wide Shut).