3. MAKING IT REAL: AUTHORSHIP AND AUTHENTICITY

The question of authorship in music video, if asked at all, has tended to be posed either around the figure of the director as the controlling creative hand who stands behind the work or else around the figure of the performer, as the artistic centre within the work. The first of these strategies for attributing authorship can be seen as an attempt to simply transplant the figure of the film auteur, which is itself really only a reworked version of the romantic definition of the artist, into the field of music video. In other words, following the dominant model of auteurism sketched out in Film Studies, certain directors are identified as highly individual artists who infuse their work with their own unique thematic concerns, personal vision and stylistic traits. Moreover, in arguing for the director-as-auteur one is also arguing for a fundamentally evaluative critical approach to the study of music video, an approach which not only distinguishes between those videos deemed as art and those dismissed as not art or non-art, but also one which seeks to discuss and adjudicate on the relative artistic merits of both the video and its director. The benefit of this strategy is, of course, that it redeems familiar arguments about art and artistic worth to claim legitimacy and cultural value for what is generally taken to be a crude commercial form of popular culture.

This method of attributing authorship, a method which indexes the artistic worth of music video to the putative creative talents of the auteur, has been used to discuss and celebrate the work of a number of directors. Indeed, Heidi Peeters refers to ‘the cult around music video directors such as Michel Gondry, Spike Jonze and Chris Cunningham’ which she sees as a marker that music video is ‘transcending the stigma of dull commerciality, entering the realm of culture, if not art’. Such a claim is made possible, of course, precisely in so far as the auteurist method it is predicated on treats the director as an artist by linking their work to traditions of artistic practice – Suzie Hanna, for example, sees Gondry’s videos as ‘optical poetry’ in the tradition of Oskar Fischinger – or else simply lauding them for their artistic skill and mastery of the medium. So, Steven Shaviro extols Cunningham’s ‘synaesthetic manipulation of sound and picture in which sounds and images continually relay one another, respond to one another, and metamorphose into each other’ and Scott Repass praises Jonze’s ‘ability to blend several layers of intertextuality seamlessly in creating his distinctive postmodern aesthetic’. And indeed it is perfectly possible to find both artistic creativity and thematic consistency across the oeuvre of both of these directors. Chris Cunningham’s work, for example, is consistently marked by the use of digital imaging technologies to question the definition and limits of the human body. In contorting, distorting, shattering and violating the body, videos such as COME TO DADDY (1997), FROZEN (1998), AFRICA SHOK (1999), WINDOW WICKER (1999) and SHEENA IS A PARASITE (2006) create a hauntingly surreal, often horrific, aesthetic of monstrous humanity. Whereas Cunningham’s style emerges from a series of postproduction processes which digitally manipulate the photographic image, Michel Gondry’s distinctive surreal aesthetic, by contrast, is linked to the profilmic creation of fairytale dreamscapes in front of the camera often in real time. Indeed, the distortions in scale, the confusion between consciousness and sub-consciousness, the anachronistically low-tech design of the production set, not to mention the dream-logic narrative structure which characterises the videos for Radiohead’s ‘Knives Out’ (2001), Björk’s ‘Bachelorette’ (1997) and ‘Human Behaviour’ (1993), and Beck’s ‘Deadweight’ (1997) and ‘Cellphone’s Dead’ (2006), can all be understood as components of Gondry’s auteurist footprint. Indeed, it is possible to trace both a thematic concern with the nature of reality and its link to consciousness and a stylistic technique which privileges the profilmic event and in-camera processes over postproduction visual effects across his work in music video as well as through a range of other feature films, shorts and advertisements. Similarly, Roger Beebe has employed this auteurist method to discuss the work of Hype Williams and Spike Jonze. In terms of the former, he claims that Williams’s distinctive style came to define almost single-handedly ‘the aesthetic of hip hop video in the late 1990s’. Moreover, despite evincing ‘no unified style from video to video’, Beebe goes on to understand Jonze’s own auteurism as a specific form of metagenre pastiche which draws not only on music video’s past, but on the history of popular culture more generally.

However, while turning to long-standing discourses of the art world and installing the figure of the auteur is certainly one way of claiming artistic
legitimacy for both music video and criticism of it, it is not the only, or perhaps even the best, way of doing so. Indeed, there are a number of problems which arise from simply grafting the dominant model for understanding the art of cinema onto the study of music video. Firstly, the ability to unearth thematic and stylistic consistencies across numerous instances of any one director’s output is incredibly rare. In fact, while the authorist method of ferreting out such consistencies does yield results for directors such as Cunningham, Gondry, Williams and Jonze, on the whole the specificities of music video as a commercial form inevitably militate against this. This is not to say that there is not any number of creative directors working in the field, nor that they cannot or should not be thought of as artists. Rather, it is to make the more obvious point that the formal, generic and commercial imperatives of music video make it much less likely that a director will have the desire, or more precisely the opportunity, to develop a distinctive visual signature. Put crudely, directors who specialise in working in music video will not only produce many more films than a director working in cinema, but perhaps more importantly they will work with many different performers, often from a wide range of music genres, and by commercial necessity will prioritise the need to effectively promote the song over any desire to emboss the finished product with their artistic imprimatur. The result for many well-regarded and successful directors of music video is a long list of individual works which, even if they contain markers of creativity, will not cohere as an oeuvre marked by stylistic and/or thematic consistency. The second main problem really concerns the use of the authorist approach in the first place. This is not simply to do with the fact that it tends to reduce music video to a sub-genre of film and its study to a sub-discipline of Film Studies, nor even to do with the knot of theoretical problems associated with defining singular authorship in audio-visual forms of popular culture. Rather, the emphasis it places on the person deemed responsible for organising the look and feel of the images (the director) serves to marginalise or ignore both the people responsible for making the music and the people who perform in the video itself.

The second main approach to conceptualising authorship in music video starts from the other end, so to speak, in so far as it privileges analysis of the performer of the music, or more precisely their performance of the song in the music video, over the director of the visual action. Shaviro claims that ‘In Western culture ... the voice is generally taken to be a sign of interiority, authority, and authenticity.’ Indeed, Lisa Lewis argues that the soundtrack, and in particular the vocal track, often operates ‘like a narrator’s omnipotent voiceover’ which guides the visual action. As such, it is not just the sheer presence of the performer, the fact that we can see them, but rather that we get to see them articulate the words and sentiments of the song that, for Lewis, encourages us to see them as the video’s author. The equation of performance in the video with authorship of it has been most notably and most extensively played out in relation to Madonna. For despite her working with a number of renowned music video auteurs – directors such as David Fincher, Jonas Åkerlund and, indeed, Chris Cunningham – the scholarship dedicated to understanding the ‘Madonna phenomenon’ almost uniformly presupposes that she is the author of the work in which she appears. In this respect it matters little whether she is being celebrated as the postfeminist icon who ‘made it possible to articulate feminist ideas in an accessible (or indeed sexually provocative) style’ or damned as being merely a ‘material girl’, a proponent of ‘slut feminism’ who has ‘has marketing savvy in spades’. For both responses are two sides of the same coin inasmuch as both are simply different readings of the same videos, videos which are themselves usually taken to be the product of Madonna’s intentional creative ambitions. Indeed, it would be impossible to come to either conclusion without the presumption that Madonna was the guiding creative force behind the videos. On this view, music video can be seen as a key site through which the star image of certain performers is established and circulated. And while it is true to say that the overwhelming majority of work of this kind has been focused on Madonna, precisely the same model of authorship can be used to understand the videos of, say, Michael Jackson, Christina Aguilera, Björk, Eminem, Robbie Williams, Rihanna and Lady Gaga.

While in many ways this latter approach seems more attuned to the specificities of music video, it, too, comes with its own set of limitations. Firstly, the model of authorship evoked by this mode of criticism is no more theoretically rigorous or conceptually coherent than the traditional director-as-auteur model. Indeed, one way of describing this kind of work is as a form of star-as-auteur criticism. However, the relationship between stardom and authorship is more often than not presumed rather than established on the basis of theoretical or empirical analysis. In other words, the sheer presence of Madonna in a video, for example, is usually taken to be sufficient evidence of her authorship of it. Secondly, and relatedly, this form of inquiry demands the presence of the star in the first place in order for any analysis to be undertaken. And although this is an obvious claim it is no less important for being so. For not only is it predicated on an already established and relatively stable star image within which the performance in any one video can be interpreted, but in the second instance it requires the presence of a star as performer in the video. In other words, it is the a priori fact of their stardom that allows the critic to presume that they have control over the content of the video. The result of this is, once again, a critical strategy geared up to account for the exception rather than the rule. Put simply, the overwhelming majority of music videos fall outside of this critical purview in so far as they are neither made by stars nor feature a star. In this way, then, both director-as-auteur and star-as-auteur models of accounting for authorship in music video are not only rooted in the disciplinary vocabulary
of Film Studies but also erect a critical strategy for explaining popular culture based on exclusivity. Ironically, therefore, they end up recasting a ubiquitous, everyday, popular product as a minority phenomenon. Or, more precisely, pursuing either of these strategies results in the attribution of cultural value to a limited number of videos that can be retro-fitted to these readymade models and leaves us with no method for thinking about the vast majority of videos that cannot. In many ways this is not at all surprising given that, like the more immediate model of auteurism it is derived from, the Romantic underpinnings of this concept of creativity are rooted in the traditions and operations of the art world which historically set the terms for distinguishing art from non-art. As such, to reappropriate this critical strategy in relation to music video is just another instance of serving the same dish with a different sauce.

Authorship and Authenticity

One of the reasons why both of these approaches can only ever yield limited accounts of authorship in music video is because neither really ever attempt to deal with the music part of music video. In other words, by drawing on the critical vocabulary of Film Studies and the art world they overlook or ignore some of the key concerns of both the academics studying popular music and the audiences who enjoy it. And a major one of these concerns is the issue of authenticity – what it is, how it varies from genre to genre, how it is used by fans and critics alike as a key criterion for selecting, assessing and attributing significance to the music they listen to. These are, however, not straightforward concerns to address, for authenticity is not something that inheres in the music itself, a tangible property that can be easily discovered and measured. Rather, the impalpability of authenticity means that it is perhaps better conceived as an economy, or as Keir Keightley suggests, 'a value, a quality we ascribe to perceived relationships between music, socio-industrial practices and listeners or audiences'.\(^{10}\) Neither the director-as-auteur nor the star-as-auteur model of thinking about music video, with their focus on the creativity of the artist, is able to deal adequately with the complexity of the question of authenticity. Indeed, Alan Moore argues that 'academic consideration of authenticity should ... shift from consideration of the intention of various originators towards the activities of various perceivers'.\(^{11}\) On this view, questions of intentionality, creativity and authorship become subsumed into the much more complex and important issue of authenticity precisely in so far as the presence of an auteur – director, star, or otherwise – does not in itself guarantee authenticity. This is not to say that they play no part in the creation of an authentic product, but rather that in both popular music and music video authorship and authenticity are constructed along multiple axes. In other words, authenticity does not inhere solely in the creative credentials of performers or directors but

is, on the contrary, always 'ascribed to, rather than inscribed in, a performance'.\(^{12}\) Moreover, following the logic of this line of thinking, the attribution of authorship can only ever follow from, or be one possible by-product of, an already established authentic position. Put simply, within the field of popular music it is not possible to be an inauthentic auteur.

So while the discourse of authorship is important, it is trumped in the last instance by the process of ascribing authenticity. For, as Roy Shuker argues, it is authenticity that is the 'central evaluative criterion' in the appreciation of popular music, and authorship is a key means, but in no way the only means, of establishing that authenticity.\(^{13}\) Indeed Shuker goes on to suggest that 'in its common-sense usage, authenticity assumes that the producers of music texts undertook the "creative" work themselves; that there is an element of originality or creativity present'.\(^{14}\) As such, while it is impossible to be an auteur without being authentic it is difficult to be authentic without demonstrating the creativity of an auteur. And of course, there are a set of culturally and institutionally recognised procedures for displaying originality, creativity and individuality. As we have seen in the previous chapter, for example, different genres of music videos can be used to situate an artist as, variously, an authentic member of a particular culture, a creative and artistic individual, or a skilled and talented performer. In this way videos can play a significant role in constructing and establishing an artist as authentic.

Michael Coyle and Jon Dolan argue that Kurt Cobain's authenticity as an alternative rock musician is based not on any innate personal or musical criteria but on his ability to respond to, and perform within, a certain set of discursive expectations.\(^{15}\) In terms of the traditions of rock music within which Cobain worked, this involved establishing and maintaining an image of anti-commercial rebelliousness despite achieving significant commercial success. For, of course, 'real rock is always a rebellion, always a disrespect to the hierarchy, a blow to the empire'.\(^{16}\) To be taken seriously, the rock musician has to display not only musical skill and creativity but also musical integrity and 'disrespect to the hierarchy'. And they must display that musical integrity, moreover, by simultaneously acknowledging their musical heritage and marking their distinctiveness from that heritage. Straw has argued that alternative rock is canonical, aware of its heritage, and dependent on it: to be part of alternative rock culture the musician must exhibit 'specific forms of connoisseurship' and knowledge of the genre's history, as well as making his or her own contribution to that history.\(^{17}\) However, it is not only knowledge that must be put on display. As Auslander points out, 'the concept of rock authenticity is linked with the romantic bent of rock culture, whose adherents want to imagine rock music as truly expressive of the artists' souls and psyches, and as consistently politically and culturally oppositional'.\(^{18}\) To be authentic, therefore, the rock musician must demonstrably 'live' his rebellion.
It is in this context that music video, somewhat ironically, is now one of the key sites through which a rock musician puts both musicianship and rebellion on display. Analysis of Nirvana's *In Bloom* (1992) is instructive here, not only because of the way it achieves these ends but also because of its particular position in the band's career trajectory. Released to promote the fourth single from their breakthrough album, *Nevermind* (1991), the video attempts to reconcile Nirvana's by now considerable commercial success with the demand to disavow that success. The three previous videos which accompanied the earlier releases from the album, and indeed the original video for 'In Bloom' which was made before the album was released, all work to situate the band, and Cobain in particular, in the authentic 'down and dirty' milieu of Seattle's grunge culture. By contrast, *In Bloom* acknowledges the band's rapidly acquired status as a mediated brand, one which increasingly came to stand (in) for grunge itself. Operating principally as a pastiche of the popular US TV variety programme, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, the video opens with the host introducing the band as 'three fine young men from Seattle' who are 'thoroughly alright and decent fellows'. Shot in grainy, low definition black and white, the band is presented as a pastiche image of the kind of wholesome pop group that regularly appeared as musical guests on the show during the 1950s and '60s. With neatly combed hair, wearing matching suits, and presenting similar fixed grins, they strum their way through the song to the screams of the girls in the audience. The cross-cutting between shots of the clean-cut performers and images of the near hysterical audience continues until about the video's midpoint at which time an alternative narrative diegesis enters the mix and is intercut with the one already established. This second performance, however, does not feature the 'thoroughly alright and decent' Nirvana but the rough and ready, anti-establishment Nirvana. With long unkempt hair, and wearing frilly summer dresses and heavy para-boots, this version of the band sets about the proper work of the rock rebel – the systematic smashing up of the set and their instruments in angry protest. Both the video's premise and its action, therefore, work on multiple levels simultaneously. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, the mobilisation of the wholesome image of Nirvana which begins the video, an image which functions as a synecdoche for the institutional machinery which seeks to transform the band into a marketable product, is really only there to demonstrate that Nirvana have not been co-opted into this model of capitalist business practice. In other words, despite the massive commercial success of *Nevermind*, *In Bloom* invites us to believe that the band have not sold out, are still in touch with their grunge roots, and are able to continue working as autonomous artists. Secondly, the video's underlying conceit itself demonstrates to the serious rock fan that Nirvana are aware not only of rock's musical heritage but also of the history of representing the genre which accompanies that heritage. For in its pastiche of *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *In Bloom* is not simply critiquing the link between the mediation of rock and its commodification, but, more complexly, situating the band squarely within a tradition of performers who have appeared on the actual television show and achieved notoriety by not toeing the institutional line. Whether it was not removing the drug-taking reference from their lyric, as was the case with The Doors in 1967, not performing the prescribed song, as Bob Diddley did in 1955, or simply walking out in a manner akin to Bob Dylan's 1963 protest, a number of renowned rock rebels had used the buttoned-down conservatism of Sullivan's show to throw into relief their own anti-establishment image. Seen in this context, therefore, the video allows Nirvana not only to demonstrate that they are knowledgeable about rock's history of rebelliousness but also to present themselves as part of that history. Moreover, the acquisition of musical skill and knowledge of music traditions, not to mention a commitment to rebellion, are not frivolous undertakings but, on the contrary, require work and dedication. In other words, they are serious activities and, as such, impel us to take them seriously. This is no accident; as Keightley argues: 'seriousness is the defining feature of rock, which must always be seen to be engaging with something "more" than just pleasure or fun. Rebellion, in this sense, is simply the most spectacular "something more."'19 The video, then, despite its humour, is a serious attempt to ensure that the band are taken seriously as rock rebels and not dismissed as 'corporate shit'.20

Many of these discursive expectations which conspire to produce the authentic rock persona are, of course, generically specific. This is not to say, however, that appeals to authenticity are any less common, or any less important, in other genres of popular music. With the notable exception of mainstream pop, all genres of popular music have their own highly developed discourses of authenticity.21 Whether the genre is defined by a relationship to a specific technology, such as the distinctive acid house sound of the Roland synthesiser; by identification with a specific location, such as the Manchester sound of the early 1990s or the Liverpool scene of the early 1960s; by anti-establishment attitude, such as gangsta rap or alternative rock, there is always something that marks the authentic and distinguishes it from the inauthentic. Indeed, Simon Frith argues that 'inauthentic' . . . is a term that can be applied evaluatively even within genres which are, in production terms, "inauthentic" by definition'.22 It is possible, and in some cases even desirable, therefore, to be authentically inauthentic. The main point here, though, is that any discussion of authorship in music video simply must take account of the complex workings of authorship in popular music and its inextricable links to the notion of authenticity. For whatever other functions it may perform, the discourse of authenticity is the primary means of marking a product's difference from that deemed crudely commercial. Quite how that authenticity is secured, however, and who can claim in it in the first place, are not only complex questions but
ones which point towards the political dimensions of authorship in/of music video.

**Gendering Authenticity**

In the discourses of popular music, cultural value and critical acclaim are rooted in what Laurie Schulze et al. refer to as a ‘high popular culture / low popular culture antagonism’. In other words, the same distinctions that have historically been used to differentiate ‘high art’ from ‘mass culture’ are replicated within the field of the popular to similarly separate out the valued from the not valued, the worthy from the worthless. Whether this takes the form of crediting new bands or genres with avant-garde ambitions or utilizing Romantic notions of the ‘artist-as-hero’ to give licence to the integrity and sincerity of their musical expression, the result is the same. In any genre, music critics and fans adjudicate between the artistic and the commercial, the original and the formulaic, the authentic and the inauthentic. And these distinctions, although their precise implementation may vary between country music and rock music, hip hop and dance, are not simply specific to the genre or to popular music itself but rather are made along time-honoured lines. It is in this sense that Motti Regev argues that:

Cultural forms gain artistic recognition when their producers of meaning ‘prove’ that they (a) contain ‘serious’ meanings and aesthetic genuineness; (b) they are produced by a definable creative entity and (c) the creative entity is autonomous, producing its works for their own sake.

In terms of popular music the latter two are by far the most important. Within most, if not all, genres of popular music, bands or artists who are seen as authentic and credible musicians must not only play and perform their music but should also write it. By the same token, re-mixes and cover versions of songs must be distinctive enough to show the creative impress of the performers who rework them. Even in genres, such as dance or hip hop, where sampling – what Shusterman calls the ‘proud art of appropriation’ – forms a key part of musical production, there will invariably be a known and named ‘creative entity’ responsible for the finished track. The converse of this scenario also holds inasmuch as, generally speaking, those musicians who rely on the services of professional songwriters are disdained. Song writing as a profession still has resonances of Tin Pan Alley and the factory-style production of music that that phrase has come to encapsulate. Indeed, to perform a song written by someone else is often taken to be a key marker of inauthenticity and lack of artistic originality and integrity. As we have already seen in relation to Kurt Cobain and Nirvana, performers of popular music, if they are to be taken seri-

ously as artists, must go to great lengths to demonstrate that their music is not made with commercial intent even, and especially, when they have significant commercial success.

The political point of all this, however, is that the distinction between high culture/art and low culture/popular which underpins the discursive construction of authenticity and inauthenticity is not simply a mechanism for sorting good culture from bad. Andreas Huyssen argues that the distinctions drawn between ‘high’ and ‘mass’ culture have a long history in Western thought and that such distinctions have always been gendered. Within this binarism the masculine position has historically been associated with serious authentic art while the feminine has been located as the opposite – trite, frivolous and inauthentic. It is the masculine side of these couples which is given value while the feminine side is defined as worthless, or worse, ignored altogether. This way of thinking, a way which not only holds the feminine in contradistinction to the masculine but also values the masculine over the feminine, resonates within the field of popular music where those genres defined as masculine and dominated by men are the ones that are usually afforded value and credibility and the type of music performed by, and, importantly, enjoyed by girls and women is often denigrated.

If large groups of women like an artist, that artist automatically slips down the credibility chart. It doesn’t matter if it’s Robbie Williams, Abba, Usher, Faithless – if loads of women like it, the unspoken logic goes, it’s rubbish. If you’re a band like, say, Blur, you have to shed your female fans in order to become respected.

Moreover, despite some notable exceptions, women have been restricted to a limited number of genres of music and roles within them. There are now, and have been historically, more successful women artists in R&B than in hip hop, in pop than in rock. And, of course, R&B and pop songs are more likely than hip hop or rock songs to be written by professional songwriters and merely performed by the artist whose name is on the record. What is more, women have been singers more often than they have been drummers or guitarists; they have been dancers more often than they have been DJs. In other words, women often work in the roles and genres that are least likely to attract critical acclaim or artistic credibility and are, therefore, the least likely to be deemed authentic. If anyone is considered to be the creative entity behind this sort of music it is the songwriter, the producer, even the performer’s manager rather than the performer themselves. The R&B or pop singer’s lack of credibility stands in stark contrast to the position of the rock band members who write their own songs or the hip hop artists who perform their own rap. Given this, there remain really only two routes by which female performers are able to lay claim
to some level of authenticity. The first of these was paved by singer-songwriters such as Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon and Suzanne Vega and is defined by the degree to which they able to retain control of the production, performance (and very often personal, emotional) content of their songs. More recently, this route has been taken not only by singer-songwriters such as Sheryl Crow, Aimee Mann, Dido, KT Tunstall, Lily Allen, Duffy, Lisa Hannigan, Laura Marling and Ellie Goulding, but also the women artists who write and perform under the pseudonyms of, respectively, Florence and the Machine, Little Boots, Bat for Lashes, and Marina and the Diamonds. The second pathway (which is not necessarily always distinct from the first) involves the cultivation of a star image and attendant public persona based on artistic eccentricity. If Nico, Patti Smith, Grace Jones, Kate Bush, Sinéad O’Connor, Björk, Tori Amos and PJ Harvey can be seen as taking-out the possibilities for this route, then Fiona Apple, La Roux, Amy Winehouse, Charlotte Gainsbourg, Paloma Faith, Jessie J and Lady Gaga have followed in their wake. At this point it will be fruitful to examine the work of two putatively similar groups to consider the ways in which this gendered difference is constructed around and through discourses of art and commerce, authentic and inauthentic, masculine and feminine.

In many ways the video *Me and My Girls* (2006) is unexceptional. Operating squarely within the conventions of the staged performance genre, it is set entirely in a studio and features four female performers lip-synching to the lyrics of the song and performing a range of choreographed dance moves. Formally, the video moves between both static and mobile establishing shots which situates the performers within the highly stylised space of the studio and in relation to each other, and a combination of medium shots and close-ups which take us nearer to each of the four members of the group. By focusing on a particular detail of the dance routine or accentuating moments of the vocal performance, these latter shots serve not only to individuate the performers but also to reinforce the hierarchy between them in so far as the performance of the lead singer, Yasmin, is privileged over that of Jade and Cloe, and to a lesser extent Sasha, who raps the song’s bridge section. This tension between collectivity and individuality is also played out in the styling of the group. For the most part, the three principal performers all wear the same patterned black jeans and heeled boots. In these segments of the video, the girls’ individuality is signalled by the variation in their vest tops and nuances in make-up and hairstyle. The introduction of Sasha not only marks a musical change but also a change in costume and performance style. With henna-patterned arms and jewelled foreheads, wearing flowing silk skirts, ornamental belts and cropped tops which frame their bellies, the group perform a choreographed routine reminiscent of certain kinds of Middle Eastern dance. The final shot of the video, a close-up of Yasmin gazing provocatively out towards the audience as the image fades to black, both brings the action to a close and re-confirms her privileged place within the band and within the visual economy of the video.

In these ways then, *Me and My Girls* is not only an exemplar of the staged performance genre of music video, but also typical of a multitude of contemporary videos by either female vocal groups or individual women pop stars. Indeed, both formally and aesthetically, the above account could equally serve as a description of videos by The Pussycat Dolls, Girls Aloud, Destiny’s Child, Rihanna, Christina Aguilera or Britney Spears, not to mention a host of others. But if, stylistically speaking, *Me and My Girls* is thoroughly unexceptional then in other ways, and especially in relation to the way it calls into question the very definition of the form it so comfortably imitates, it is quite remarkable. For Yasmin, Sasha, Cloe and Jade are not real flesh-and-blood pop stars but, in fact, children’s toys: members of the Bratz™ range of dolls manufactured by MGA Entertainment. More precisely, the video features four animated versions of the ‘passion for fashion™’ dolls which, besides being a globally successful toy (more than 1.25 million Bratz™ dolls have been sold worldwide since their launch in June 2001), star in their own TV show, make movies and records, have their own magazine and computer games, and design a range of couture children’s clothing, as well as licensing a whole host of related branded products and accessories which, taken together, have generated in excess of $2 billion in sales figures.

However, despite five successful albums, a number of chart singles and a recent ‘world tour’, Bratz™ have never achieved critical acclaim. Indeed, the fact that they are animated characters with no human voice of their own would seem to militate against them being taken seriously as performers, as anything other than children’s toys. They cannot write their own songs, they need human stand-ins for their live performances, they have no existence prior to or outside of their promotional and commercial role. Yet, although these factors would seem to self-evidently deny a band any claim to authenticity they do not always mean a band cannot be taken seriously.

Gorillaz, another animated band with their own range of merchandise (including clothes, books, computer games, dolls and novelty items) were short-listed for the prestigious Mercury Music Prize in 2001 and have their work regularly reviewed in both the music and mainstream press. In many ways the different fortunes of the two bands exemplify the issues that surround the notions of credibility and authenticity in popular music and the way in which it is structured along both generic and gendered lines. So while Bratz™ and Gorillaz have in common their virtual existence, their commercial success and their plethora of associated merchandise, they nevertheless differ significantly in the way their existence is discussed and understood. For where Bratz™, the band, are seen as merely another product of a major manufacturing company, part of the Bratz™ brand, Gorillaz are the creation of an
already established and critically acclaimed rock musician, Damon Albarn, and his collaborator Jamie Hewlett, a comic book artist with a cult following. Gorillaz, therefore, have a readily identified author for their music and their videos, a 'creative entity' with a voice to explain and defend their existence, while Bratz™ call upon the services of professional songwriters, people who also write for a number of pop acts such as Britney Spears, Kelly Clarkson and Jessica Simpson. Furthermore, the combination of the authenticity of Albarn's voice and the music that is produced in Gorillaz's name serves to situate them on the confluence of a number of critically acclaimed, 'high popular culture' genres – hip hop, house, indie rock, and world – while Bratz™ sit comfortably on the R&B/pop borderline. Moreover, Gorillaz conforms to a standard rock band line-up: one that is predominantly male and consists of a keyboard player, bassist, lead guitarist and drummer. As such, their virtual existence does not disbar them from critical acclaim but rather serves to enhance Albarn's status as an original and creative artist. As such, they provide an outlet both for his musical inventiveness and their anime-influenced art music videos serve to showcase the work of Jamie Hewlett. Bratz™, by contrast, are not only a clearly commercial product but one that is modelled on another commercial product – the girl group. Girl groups have played a significant yet half-buried role in the history of popular music. Their music has been a regular feature of the singles chart and their influence has been felt by bands from the Beatles onwards. They have, however, rarely been awarded critical acclaim to match their commercial success. Indeed, the women in these groups are often depicted as nothing more than puppets manipulated by the men they work with/for. So, just as Gorillaz are seen not as a 'creative entity' in themselves but as an outlet for Damon Albarn and Jamie Hewlett's creativity, the Ronettes' hits are often depicted simply as examples of producer Phil Spector's creativity and the Spice Girls as examples of Simon Fuller's managerial prowess. Moreover, not only do Bratz™ follow a typical girl group line-up with four singers/dancers one of whom takes the lead vocal, but the music produced under the name of Bratz™ is typical girl group music – chart music which appeals to a largely female audience. And their videos are typical girl group, chart music, videos with choreographed dance routines, fashionable outfits, and brightly coloured sets. Bratz™, therefore, are not merely computer graphics with no authorial voice of their own – they are a pastiche of other real women who are packaged as products and deprived of an authorial voice of their own.

Author Erasure

This process of de-authorisation and de-authentication is important precisely because the question of who can be seen as the authoritative, authentic voice of a video impacts in crucial ways on how that video can be read. It is perhaps an obvious point, but one which is nonetheless worth stressing, that women who feature in videos as performers of their own song overwhelmingly tend to be afforded agency and identity, precisely a voice, in a way denied to other, usually anonymous, female performers, characters or extras. The women who we see dancing in the underground fetish club scenario of Christina Aguilera's DIRTY (2002), for instance, are not permitted the same authorial influence or performative centrality as Aguilera herself and thus are figured very differently within the video's visual economy. A useful way of considering this point and its political significance is through an analysis of the two very different videos used to promote Khia's 'My Neck, My Back (Lick It)'. The song was first released in America in 2002 and emerged out of the genre of popular music variously known as Southern Rap and Dirty South Hip Hop: a genre renowned for overtly sexually lyrics and videos. Indeed, 'My Neck, My Back (Lick It)' can be understood as a 'sexual instruction' song in which the female singer outlines explicitly what she wants her male partner to do to her in order to give her sexual pleasure and, as such, fits neatly into the lyrical conventions of a genre in which sex, drugs and partying are the key lyrical themes. It is also a lyric that situates Khia as part of a long tradition of black women singers who have expressed sexual desires and demands in their songs – a tradition that stretches from blues songs such as Bessie Smith's 'I Need a Little Sugar in My Bowl' (1931) and Ida Cox's 'One Hour Mama' (1939) to the more contemporary 'Rock the Boat' (2001) by Aaliyah or 'Georgia Peach' (2006) by Rasheeda. And it is a tradition that is politically important. Gwendolyn D. Pough argues that 'by singing so freely about their sexual urges and desires the blues women worked against the policing of Black women's bodies and the politics of dissemblance'. Similarly, Beverley Skeggs argues that by rapping about sexual desires female rappers turn themselves from sexual objects into sexual subjects. In doing so they challenge the basis of the social order which seeks to contain them. So it is possible, in this light, to see Khia's 'My Neck, My Back (Lick It)' as working within a number of discourses of authenticity: it situates Khia as a member of a genre community; it demonstrates knowledge of Dirty South's musical heritage; and it is political precisely inasmuch as it transgresses normative ideas of appropriate female behaviour. The video that was used to promote the single on its original release in America in 2002 serves to reinforce this reading of the song by similarly situating Khia in the hip hop community and, more importantly, by making it clear that Khia is the author of the song's sentiments. The video is a staged performance based around a single scenario – a house party at which guests are seen to variously relax in the garden and outdoor pool, eat food from the barbecue, and, later in the evening, dance inside the house. This scenario is crucial in so far as it establishes a plausible, mundane context in which sexual activity could both take place and be discussed. The normalcy of the setting
is reinforced by the way the partygoers are dressed and the way they behave. They wear everyday clothes – swimsuits by the pool, and jeans or shorts with t-shirts, vest tops, or bikini tops elsewhere. They swim, roll on the grass, cook on the barbecue, and dance – both individually and with one another. Within this setting Khia is squarely located as the author of the song’s sexual demands. Not only is she the main focus for the gaze of the camera but at every turn her performance acknowledges that gaze and, by implication, the audience’s own gaze. Quite literally, in fact, as even when she has her back to the camera she turns her head to meet us face to face. Throughout the video we see Khia lip-synching the words of the song. The sexual demands of the lyrics become Khia’s own demands, embodied in her authorial voice and performance of in-control sexuality. For, in consistently returning our look and taking ownership of the lyrics, not only does Khia claim authorship of the song’s graphic sexual narrative but also positions that narrative as part of a discourse of female sexual empowerment.

The second video released to promote the song in the UK and Europe, and the one that is perhaps now most readily associated with it, tells a very different story and has very different political implications in doing so. Indeed, in this video not only is Khia’s authorship erased but a narrative of postfeminist sexual empowerment becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to sustain. For the video features neither Khia herself nor the house party scenario but instead is based around the performance of three stiletto-heeled, bikini-clad young women washing a bright yellow H2 Hummer. The first image that we see – a close-up tracking shot of the buttocks of the women as they walk towards the car – sets the scene for the video: these women are bodies to be looked at and are rarely afforded the opportunity to return the camera’s/our gaze. There are close-ups, in turn, of the rim of the steering wheel, the nipple-like button of an air-vent, and the polished surface of a wing mirror being slowly licked. One of the women polishes the car’s phallic armrest in a manner redolent of masturbation and, with a knowing look, wipes a dipstick in a similar fashion. Another is shown in the back seat of the car rubbing the pipe of a vacuum cleaner seductively over her neck and cleavage. Any notion of active female sexuality is belied as the women themselves are shown to be the ones responding to the command to ‘lick it’, giving pleasure rather than receiving it. Moreover, in contrast to the original video where Khia is never caught unawares by the camera, we are constantly given access to isolated and objectified parts of these women’s bodies. Indeed, for much of the video we are presented with a concatenation of disconnected body parts where the buttocks of one woman are replaced by the lips of another, and images of hands wielding wet sponges are followed by close-ups of thighs in an unidentifiable confusion of female flesh. All markers of the women’s individual personality are effectively removed, literally washed away, so that all that is left are differently
clothed, but similar, bodies. Difference, when it is marked at all, is marked by their colour-coded costumes and distinctive jewellery, serving, rather as it does in the Bratz™ video for ‘Me and My Girls’, as the key mechanism through which identity, or, perhaps more accurately here, non-identity, is signalled.

In order to make the video acceptable for broadcasting, both versions clean up the sexually explicit and crudely expressed lyrics by replacing offensive words with more socially acceptable ones. In particular, the words ‘my pussy and my crack’ are replaced with a breathy sigh and the words ‘just like that’ so that the chorus becomes ‘Lick my aaaaah just like that’. It is interesting to see how this plays out in the different videos: how it works to reinforce a reading of Khia as a strong sexually assertive woman in the US video but serves to emphasise the passivity of the anonymous women in the UK version. As Khia is shown to sing the words – to her dancing partner, to the man painting her toenails as she lounges by the pool, to the men who surround her as she sings at the barbecue – the assertiveness of the original lyrics is not diminished. We see a woman making demands, telling her lover, or potential lover, what he must do to give her pleasure. The breathy sigh suggests that she is receiving pleasure, that she is confident that her demands will be met. And, throughout the video, the response to Khia and the demands she makes is positive: the men in the video respond with smiles and admiring glances. In the other video, however, no one woman is shown to sing the words of the chorus. The three women are only ever shown lip-synching to the discrete phrases of it. More precisely, one woman is shown mouthing the words ‘my neck’ while washing the door of the car, another mouthes ‘my back’ while sponging the car’s fender, yet another sighs breathily while leaning against the car and being sprayed with water. The men in the video, a group of middle-aged firemen who appear only towards its conclusion, respond very differently to those in the US version. They leer at the women as they wash the car, discuss them with each other and, ultimately, spray them with water from a phallic hose held between their legs at crotch level. With the money shot in the can, so to speak, the video ends as the hose is switched off and a trickle of water leaks from the tip of the nozzle. The disconnected words that the individual women are seen to mouth, and the sigh they are shown to make, therefore, become simply vocallyised sexual responses rather than words with meaning. Instead of being a sign of pleasure anticipated or received, the sigh comes to indicate reaction: no longer part of a demand for something to be done but rather a response by the women to something that has been done to them. The sexual assertiveness of the lyrics, where a woman is confidently and explicitly instructing her partner in ways to give her sexual pleasure, is, thus, wholly nullified.

So, on the one hand we have a clearly authored video where Khia is represented as an authentic voice of a music genre and the community associated with it, and as someone who has something to say about both the pleasures
and politics of heteronormative relationships. On the other hand, however, we have a video where authorship is obfuscated, authenticity is elided, and the voice with something to say is silenced. The lyrics are divorced from any naturalistic setting and removed to a soft-core fantasy world where women’s bodies are put on display, where commonplace actions are sexualised, and women themselves, as active agents, are effectively hidden in images of body parts and metaphors for male sexual gratification. And there are any number of other videos where the women who are featured are merely body parts to be looked at with no suggestion that they might have a voice or an identity outside of the video. In videos such as N.E.R.D.’s LAP DANCE (2001), Nelly’s TIP DRILL (2002), Rocco DeLuca’s COLORFUL (2006), or The Fratellis’s FLATHEAD (2007), among countless others, the women who appear are clearly in supporting roles. They are objectified, in the sense that the focus is on their bodies and their sexualised performance, they have no voice, and they serve merely to enhance the authority of the male artists. Indeed, these videos make it quite clear where the authentic voice of the video lies—with the male performer(s)—whether this is achieved by Nelly’s knowing glances at the camera that invite us to be complicit with his actions as he strokes, prods or showers money onto naked flesh, or Rocco DeLuca’s constant presence as his image clothes the nude figure of a nameless woman and protects her from the camera’s gaze. However, videos such as Benny Benassi’s SASSATION (2002) or WHO’S YOUR DADDY? (2003), DJ Peran’s WE WANT TO BE FREE (2003), Eric Prydz’s CALL ON ME (2004), Junior Jack’s STUPIDISCO (2004), Alex Gaudino’s DESTINATION CALABRIA (2006), MSTRKRFT’s EASY LOVE (2006), Michael Mind’s BLINDED BY THE LIGHT (2007) and De Souza’s GUILTY (2007), and many more, work in a way that is similar to the UK version of MY NECK MY BACK (LICK IT) in that there is no identifiable authorial presence in the video, simply an array of women’s bodies and body parts. Any men who appear in such videos are, at best, peripheral to the action: they are there primarily to look at the women, and just as importantly, to be seen to be able to do so with impunity. They have as little claim to the authentic authorial voice as the women they are there to ogle. By default, then, the authentic voice of the video comes from the men who made the music. They are the ones who are recognised as skilled within their genre. The music gives them the credibility to be the voice of the video.

What is important when we consider authorship in music video, therefore, is not simply who directed any given video or even who is seen to perform in the video but rather who can produce the authentic voice of the video. And who can have that voice is not fixed or stable—it may be the artist who made the record the video promotes, it may be the person who can be seen to lip-sync to the words of the song, it may be the director of the video. Who it is in any single instance, though, fundamentally bears on the meanings we can make from the video and the pleasures we can get from it. In the following section of

the book we will examine how both genre and authorship interact with other discourses to produce ways of understanding the representation of gender, race and ethnicity in a range of music videos.

NOTES

29. Gorillaz 'vinyl figures' have been produced in a number of limited (albeit not small) editions and their packaging proudly proclaims that they are 'a work of art, not a toy'.

PART II

SEXED, RACED AND GENDERED IDENTITY IN MUSIC VIDEO