CHAPTER 12

A Music Video Canon?

Music video’s reckoning seems due. Though we may not want to link its history to MTV’s—depending on your predilection, you might tie Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody” or the Scopitones to the genre’s inception, and music videos have long since left MTV behind—nevertheless, in the media swirl, most of us experienced it as middle-aged. (Our parents or children watch(ed) music video.) Music video has so deeply permeated our culture it sometimes seems to be driving it: we see it in films like The Bourne Ultimatum, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Hot Fuzz, and Moulin Rouge; movie trailers like Miami Vice and Summer of Sam; iPod and Nike commercials; grunge and hip-hop fashion; and the “plunder phonics” of composer John Oswald and contemporary hip-hop production practices.

Nickelodeon’s aim of “preserving our television heritage” aside, there are no stable archives for music video. YouTube and the MTV organization are often not responsive to inquiries from scholars. Music video history remains uncharted, even though we may feel we know video styles and our access to videos have waxed and waned: the academic literature is thin. Things might be looking up, however. Music videos are making a strong showing again, as web users log time watching pixelated YouTube links while instant messaging or surreptitiously viewing them on PDAs in the classroom or at work. On streaming video sites, access to videos is greater than ever, though many of the clips are ephemeral and not downloadable. If we seek more permanent objects, iTunes carries some music videos and there is always peer-to-peer file sharing, but image and audio quality rarely rises above that of MP3s.

A few megastars, including Michael Jackson and Madonna, have released music video compilation reels, but these have sold poorly and provide few aesthetic pleasures. Between 2002 and 2005, Palm Pictures assembled a “best of” series structured around the work of nine music video directors. While acknowledging the difficulty of selecting such a small set from MTV’s 30-year history, I think it remains the best on music video. In this chapter, I’ll analyze the work of these directors. (The music video collection stands as the most influential on DVD; many younger music video directors grew up with these as their primary source material.) Regardless of the Palm series’ importance, I still quarrel with Palm’s choices. The company packaged four white male directors in its first box set, a single DVD of an African American male director as a second release, and most recently released another box set featuring four more white male directors. The collection, working primarily in white genres and motivated by high-art and feature film aspirations, leaves out a vast array of talent, most glaringly women and members of traditionally underrepresented groups, including Floria Sigismondi, Sophie Muller, and Paul Hunter. Even the choice of European American directors can be questioned; you wonder whether Palm will release collections by seminal directors such as David Fincher, Marcus Nispel, Matt Mahurin, Mark Pellington, Dave Meyers, Francis Lawrence, and Herb Ritts.

Nevertheless, the Palm collections provide satisfactions in ways that musicians’ greatest hits albums don’t, which suggests that visual style may carry as much weight as music or performance. The series is priced at $179, but university libraries may be willing to foot the bill; individual DVDs range from $16 to $22. From a teaching standpoint, the series works wonderfully for courses in popular music, multimedia, film studies, and popular culture. Individual discs, however, are uneven. Some are lovingly produced with extensive materials; others appear slapped together. Mark Romanek’s richly chronicled DVD contains 25 music videos that can be played in a variety of ways: solo, with the director’s voiceover, or with one band member or another talking about the clip. The release also contains a 30-minute documentary, a “Making of the Video”; a “Romanekarian” Festschrift; and a 56-page photo flip book. By contrast, Chris Cunningham and Jonathan Glazer’s DVDs contain eight music videos each and Glazer’s offers almost no directorial presence. Romanek’s DVD tells us several times that photographer/performance artist Erwin Wurm was thrilled that the director drew upon his artwork for inspiration. Yet in the repetition it’s possible to pick up on interesting threads. So many of his musicians talk about “trust” that one might begin to suspect that Romanek fed his clients this word for Swengalian effect: here it sounds like a demand for directorial control.

Although the Palm collection does not provide an accurate representation of music video’s range, style, or history, it teaches us a bit about how music videos are made as well as how power and control can shift as band members and directors conspire against the record company commissioner or vice versa. All of the DVDs feature beautiful videos, thus assuring an aesthetically stimulating experience. More strikingly, they enhance our sensitivity to music video directors as auteurs; we intut that music videos are art, and the Palm collections lead us to think seriously about music video directors as auteurs who make a significant contribution to our understanding of the medium.
realm for directors to develop style and technique and to discover a means to communicate ways of experiencing music. Directorial styles diverge because there are no film schools for making music video, no industry internship programs, nor anything like the cultural practices for learning music. Music video directors have diverse backgrounds—in dance, commercials, art photography, drawing, and sculpture—and each brings his or her training to image and music, adapting to the needs at hand. In the remainder of this essay, I will focus on this question of the music video director as auteur, drawing out some differences among the work of the Palm’s eight directors.

Mark Romanek

If I were an up-and-coming music video director, Romanek’s videos would serve as my model. The work is handsome and meticulously rendered, and even when the director tries to transcend his own style—for example, his homage to crime photographer Weegee in the Keith Richards “Wicked Lies” video—everything feels set in place. The power of Romanek’s videos is opaque, especially because his personal voice seems nearly invisible under an ironclad technique. Details revealed in the DVD’s documentary suggest that sheer labor contributes to the realization of his style. A glimpse into the background of spaces reveals elaborate preparatory sketches and models. His shoots as well as his pre- and post-production processes are also more exhaustive than standard industry practice. The shoot for Jay-Z’s “99 Problems” consumed twelve days, produced twelve hours of footage, required four editors, and drew on the industry’s best. Romanek pushes hard for what he wants, as do his clients; Jay-Z muses about hoofing it for what felt like hundreds of miles. For the video “Hellagood,” Gwen Stefani describes catching a camera midair on its downward plunge into the ocean. Although Romanek’s performers recall the wearying intensity of the shoots, they seem exceptionally grateful once their work appears on the screen.

Romanek’s training is first-rate. He attended Chicago’s New Trier High School, one of the best public schools in the country, and then went on to Ithaca Film School, gaining exposure to Brakhage, Warhol, and Kubrick. Like most music video directors, he is steeped in visual references, and his conversation is littered with references to high art and popular culture, from Tati, Godard, Warhol, and Wurm to Mary Poppins. I’ve heard other music video directors grouse that Romanek simply creates collages from tear sheets (images pulled from photo books and magazines), but these comments may reveal insider policing and peer competitiveness. Some viewers may be put off by Romanek’s agonistic relationship to famous painters, sculptors, and photographers. Others may feel his level of control is antithetical to pop music. I believe the work succeeds because Romanek treats each visual and musical parameter individually and analytically.

At first glance Romanek’s tactics fit standard practices. The visuals carry a semiotic wallop built to match the song’s intensity. We see titillating imagery of phallic power: Linkin Park sprays water at the crowd as if it were ejaculate, Jay-Z’s jacket trim resembles male briefs (to trigger anxiety about African American male sexuality?); and Fiona Apple’s “Criminal” carries more than a whiff of kiddie porn. Other arresting images—Lenny Kravitz as Christ, Mick Jagger as the devil—also capture our attention. Perhaps to elicit a kinesthetic response in the viewer’s body, the characters perch precariously, leap from great heights, float, or fly? One trademark of Romanek’s style involves holding figures in tableaux before they suddenly move to the music in showy, beautifully shaped gestures: the businessmen rising and falling from a seated position into a body wave in David Bowie’s “Jump They Say”; slow-motion whirling dervishes in Madonna’s “Bedtime Stories”; and Trent Reznor twirling in midair as if he were shawarma on a spit in “Closer.” But what distinguishes Romanek’s work is that these effects are so well integrated into the texture that they do not separate out as discrete elements.

Let’s look more closely at how Romanek approaches visual parameters in service of the whole, as in his use of settings. Romanek’s environments somehow suggest both the miniature and the enormous. The texture, shape, and volume of these places and their objects can imply or represent sonic properties. Imagery eliciting aural associations include resonators, such as an imposing obelisk or a microphone shaped like a breast; reflective surfaces, including curved wooden walls or spongy, protruding materials; and visual movement evoking the processual nature of sound, whether banks of lights or rushing water. His spaces—and the textures and placement of his objects within them—seem specially molded to the songs. If the sets and props were to be schematized down to CAD gridded skeins and placed against a list of songs, they could be easily matched. One feels space in Romanek’s videos: a viewer’s eyes seek out the set’s corners and edges and quilts them to the song’s features.

One such example is Romanek and Janet Jackson’s “Got ‘til It’s Gone,” a video depicting black club culture in 60s South Africa. The video’s dancehall is beige and narrow. To one side a window joins its twin—a similarly long blue-tinted room; murals gird both rooms’ walls, or people wearing boldly patterned earthenones line up in tiers along them. These embellishments alongside an underlying structure—tiers people, murals, and duplicated rooms—complicate the video’s sense of space, evoking the aforementioned monumentality and miniaturization. “Got ‘til It’s Gone”’s bass and acoustic guitar, shaped into
litigious, wavelike gestures that seem to roll out into a more shallow, nonreverberant sonic and visual field, seem to match the song’s space, its textures and colors. By contrast, in Lenny Kravitz’s “Are You Gonna Go Way” heavy guitar riffs fit a space suggestive of an upwardly twisting vortex. Madonna’s “Bedtime Stories” unrolls one tableau after another, which matches the pedal-point. Trent Reznor’s “Closer” occurs within a tiny room that opens out into several cubbyholes. Such a space could be said to reflect the song’s cell-like construction: like the replicated set of small spaces, the song’s riffs don’t vary much.

Romanek has many techniques for using the body to musical ends. Hand gestures—fluttering fingers, punching fists, curling wrists—reflect a song’s features. Think of the way Jay-Z slaps at the camera in “99 Problems,” which fits the song’s frontality. Madonna’s upward-turning hands in “Bedtime Stories” speak to her quasi—Middle Eastern vocal ornaments. Similar analogies can be drawn for Romanek’s choreography of glances and stares.

The videos also exploit the expressive potential of the screen’s edges in relation to the body. Characters look upward, float or leap, or water or light pours down upon them from some unseen source. Likewise a foot steps into clay or a dead man’s legs jut out from behind a low embankment. Is Romanek simply speaking about a song’s ambitus or expressing hope for grace or a sense of the body’s fragility? Here’s one of music video’s simplest means to develop a sense of drama—emotional weight accrues through the placement of people and objects within space.

Romanek loves lines and curves. (One almost imagines him sketching his videos with an architect’s tools.) Note the opening shot of “Rain,” with its reiterating swoops and planes. (Romanek’s interest in a precise line places his affinities closer to Ingres than to Titian.) Most striking is when shapes expand and develop between shots or across sections of the video. In “Bedtime Stories” the opening circles—the platter and lights upon which Madonna lies—morph later into whirling dervishes. In “Scream” a single forked hall resembling a model’s runway extends into a series of richly ornamented, paired ramps. Bodies placed within these evolving graphic designs echo and underline these shapes. Romanek turns and rotates Madonna’s body and her gestures as they gradually shift from closed to open in “Bedtime Stories.” Music videos’ attenuated narrativity makes the exhibition of the body a primary dramatic device. The movement of the body from closed to open becomes a valued technique.

Romanek’s characters exhibit a heightened relation to their environments: the performers seem curious, sometimes on edge, about the places they find themselves in. Of all music video directors, only Romanek evokes a palpable sense of history in his clips. Characters seem to possess uncanny knowledge about places. Does this lie in a glance or posture, or in the characters’ use of props? Or is it that the performer’s grasp of her enveloping, enigmatic spaces surpasses the viewer’s?

Romanek claims he tries to invest his characters with a secret, or a sense of mystery. (One recalls director Jacques Tourneur’s whispering in his actors’ ears; Romanek and his performers develop dense backstories before shoots begin.) Music, the image, and characters seem to engage in a private conversation. But this opacity sometimes breaks: a viewer shuttles too quickly between a distanced gaze and flashes of intimacy to be grasped.

Romanek’s sequences can seem even more charged when they deal with cultural flashpoints. In “Got ’til It’s Gone” Romanek draws on a bevvy of loaded images tied to race and myth. Imagining the video differently along parameters like race, sexuality, gender, or class would reveal how much the piece is culturally freighted. The video lacks sense when imaginatively staged as middle-class and white. A cigarette lighter flicks by a man’s groin. A young man peeks behind a man as if he had been magically birthed. A one-eyed boxer poses. A couple presses up as if simulating rear-entry sex; children jump on mattresses and one is lifted as if by baptismal fire. Jackson’s shadow crawls up a wall like a stalking animal. And a lone figure walks outside. Though intimated rather than placed in direct address, a viewer’s situatedness in relation to race is also raised: for example, at a few points blacks and whites study one another through a stereopticon. Besides eliciting a heightened response from the viewer, “Got ’til It’s Gone”’s imagery reveals a respectful gaze; however exotizing, the directorial response vaguely acknowledges Africa as a touchstone. (Is this politically progressive?) Despite the video’s loaded imagery, its mood and tone are overwhelmingly warm (as Jackson says on the DVD commentary). The song suggests a swaying motion and a restful pause performed in comforting repetition. It draws attention to Jackson’s and Joni Mitchell’s vocal similarities (as if Mitchell’s voice were a sped up version of Jackson’s; Mitchell’s is more bird-like). Q-Tip’s rapping is friendly and mellow. Music video can hold a number of contradictory threads without any needing to be brought to terms with the others. Even with flat representations the video’s generous tone can arguably be called progressive.

How Romanek achieves such coordinated effects remains mysterious. Perhaps it’s because in Romanek’s work, every moment is photographic. Some video directors burrow their way through songs, responding moment by moment; others, like Romanek, etch a form whose outline becomes increasingly perceptible as the video unfolds. Perhaps two techniques support Romanek’s ability to connect the micro and the macro. On the micro-level, Romanek repeats and transforms visual motifs that speak to the variation of musical materials. In music, motives can resurface in new ways, with transactions occurring in the interim becoming mysterious. In music video, much like with
musical motives, a series of images, separated in time, can seem well proportioned and linked together: both music and image can be similar to a series of ripples created by a stone skipping off the surface of the water. If a varied image reappears, we can be encouraged to think it has undergone some change in its absence; perhaps the music has somehow changed the nature of this image. In Nine Inch Nails’ “Closer,” elaborate chains of iconic connections force a consideration of the links among music and images: the black “doorman” blows dust off his hat—perhaps a reaction to something that caused the film to melt earlier; the juror’s eye echoes a paper eye pasted on the arm of a metronome (à la Man Ray), and these eyes rhyme with the image of Trent Reznor’s eye popping open in a still-life tableau; the salamanders hatching from eggs grow into eels that seem to stand in for the singer’s genitalia while he hangs from the ceiling bound and gagged; the eviscerated heart nailed to a chair in the opening shot suggests the monkey stretched out on a surface (possibly for vivisection) and the medical drawings of arms with tendons splayed out; Reznor’s microphone looks like a breast with a nipple, and his tongue seems phallic. This string of imagery culminates in the image of the doorman holding a cow’s tongue in one hand.

Yet, while the viewer can close in, she can also adopt a bird’s-eye view. It may help that Romanek’s videos tend to hold together through single visual schemes. In “Closer” a hand-cranked Bolex produces jittery, damaged footage using a restrained palette of browns with dabs of blood reds. A bodycam strapped to the performers and luridly colored five-and-dime materials produce wildly different effects in Mick Jagger’s “God Give Me Everything.”

Romanek’s techniques—finding relations between lyrics and image, tuning the color scheme, using evocative gestures, spaces, and props—all work in concert to illuminate the song’s formal features. This makes his videos particularly effective in the classroom. His work highlights the ways that music video’s musicality differs from that of genres like Hollywood narrative film, commercials, or the American musical.

Michel Gondry

Of all the Palm directors, Michel Gondry is the wunderkind with the largest cultural cachet. Directing Hollywood films confers greater status than making music videos, and Gondry’s Human Nature, Eternal Sunshine of a Spotless Mind, Dave Chappelle’s Block Party, and The Science of Sleep possess the widest reach and most coveted audiences. Gondry’s films and music videos shimmer between conflicting impulses. On the one hand, Gondry’s work is the antithesis of Romanek’s. It comes out of an exceedingly personal iconography, often linked to childhood or dreams, and constructed from the handmade: Gondry relies on materials like cardboard cutouts, Lego blocks, television noise, puppets, dolls, tinfoil, and so on. On the other hand, he possesses a mathematical mind, and integrates visual canons, palindromes, and complex graphic schema. With his background in experimental film and animation, Gondry prizes hands-on control. He also adapts mickey-mouse techniques to produce interesting effects like interweaving multiple strands of imagery, or subtly offsetting one or more of these lines to create a contrapuntal effect. If Romanek’s aesthetic is Mozaritan, Gondry’s would be Baroque. As Gondry says on the DVD, “I saw Romanek’s work and decided I had to go in a completely different direction.”

Gondry aims to create a sense of enchantment: much like Romanek’s the work produces dreamlike effects. He achieves this through fetishistic instances. Since the edges of Gondry’s art brut materials are meant to show, the viewer often experiences a rugged ride before suddenly things fall into place and a moment provokes a powerful emotional response. Rough-hewn details are there for the attentive viewer, like the spacemen poised to start booking in Daft Punk’s “Around the World”; the hot dog truck’s first entrance in “Star Guitar”; Dave Grohl’s teeth gnashing while he lies in bed, and his subsequent, bored expression, at the close of the Foo Fighters’ “Everlong.” Respecting how a song’s materials work, Gondry’s visual elements repeat and vary. The crooked, L-shaped hands and arms of the bathing beauties are echoed by the jagged outlines of the two-headed puppets and the notched stairsteps in “Around the World.” In “Everlong” legs morph into logs, and water streaming in the foreground (as if down a glass pane) links with a lake’s rippled reflections.

The Foo Fighters’ “Everlong” is a good case study of the ways visual analogues can match musical features and a dreamscape can be evoked. Hoodlums inexplicably chase singer Dave Grohl and his girlfriend (played by a fellow male band member in drag) out of a twentysomething apartment party into a Texas Chainsaw Massacre scenario. “Everlong” contains a thick strand of guitar within a narrow ambitus. The voice runs up and down, but fails to break the guitar’s registral boundaries. Correspondingly, ceilings are low, exits barred, spaces are small, and the characters seem oppressed. The guitar riffs sound inexorable: no matter the effort expended, the song keeps finding itself back at that three-chord riff. The video presents powerful moments of audiovisual connection, such as a guitar riff accompanied by gnashing of teeth, hands swelling to baseball-bat size, legs morphing into logs, Grohl pushing a room-sized phone receiver, and band members emerging from their hooligan costumes. Gondry’s camera is consistently piercing and driven; as in nightmares we encounter and move past fraught moments. We become caught in the dreamwork.
Gondry develops texture in a variety of ways. A whiff of death keeps Gondry's homemade aesthetic from becoming too coy or sickly sweet. Skeletons appear in multiple guises. In “Hyper Ballad” Björk's head resembles a death mask; the light bulb nestled in her eye-socket illuminates her skull. A mix of the high-tech and handmade also creates density: the Chemical Brothers' “Star Guitar” has multiplying buildings and landscapes that might resemble the replicating effects produced with CGI, but a passing hot-dog truck makes it all seem unhelmich. Sometimes, as in Massive Attack’s “Protection,” Gondry's iconography becomes inscrutable. Here, we peer through cubbyhole-type apartment windows à la Hitchcock's Rear Window and see characters floating among 1950s and 60s bric-a-brac while they play cards, throw balls, and so on. It feels like watching an obtuse art video on a tiny screen at MoMA.

The most beautifully packaged of the Palm set, Gondry's DVD contains punch-through menus that look like pots of paint or colored pencils in a tray. On one menu Gondry plays a drum set, and children's heads wedged inside the tom-toms pop up and squeak: pressing a button takes you to another menu and stops the abuse. This show reel becomes a personal journey from childhood to adulthood, and perhaps back, as family members become momentary focal points, including Gondry's mother (who suffers from senility); Gondry's father (chronicled as a young musician in Super 8 film footage); Gondry's nine-year-old son, whose script is included; Gondry's girlfriend, who streaks in front of the camera while Gondry sits on the couch; and even Gondry's grandfather (through his landscape painting in the style of Cezanne). Seemingly every animation Gondry has made since age six has been included. Unlike Romanek's magisterial work, which makes you want to throw in the towel, Gondry's may encourage projects of self-discovery and autobiography.

Hype Williams

Hype Williams is one of the most prolific music video directors, releasing 189 videos to date. Industry insiders confide that at certain high points in his career—such as when he held four of the top ten videos—Williams would demand 15 percent rather than the industry standard 10 percent off the top of the video's total budget. Considering he lacks the art school training of his colleagues—his inspirations come from everyday materials like Eddie Murphy's Coming to America and Brian DePalma's Scarface—and did not grow up with a privileged background, such self-promotion can be seen as charming. Nor was his entrance into the industry a bed of roses: Williams painted graffiti for a TLC video, but the first show-reel so upset the producer that the videos were trashed and Williams got cursed out. Still, if Palm is footing the bill for these DVDs, it is troubling that Williams did not receive the kind of red-carpet treatment bestowed on Romanek and Gondry, since the 10 music videos on the Williams DVD in no way reflect the range and power of his enormous output.

Williams, who sometimes goes simply by "Hype," was one of the first to secure sizable budgets for hip-hop videos and became one of the first renowned African American directors. Williams's most striking work tends to be for women artists, although it remains unclear from the DVD commentary whether Williams establishes better rapport with women or whether hip-hop provides greater latitude for depictions of female performers. Many landmark videos featuring female artists have been left out of the collection. Missy Elliott's "The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)" has received the greatest critical acclaim, but it's not packaged here. Likewise, I love his stripped-down video for Talal Hicks's cover of Deniece Williams's "Silly." It contains his typically strong cameos—the singer in the foreground against a white cyclorama—yet what draws me in are shirtless men in the back. Neither does this DVD include Aaliyah's "Rock the Boat," which may not be novel but is one of the most sensual, free-flowing, Busby Berkeleyesque videos ever made. Instead, we have Hype's other legacy, T&A, which shows women's breasts and buttocks swelling up as enormous obstacles slightly above eye level. (One might acknowledge, though, that he has also done what could be considered progressive work with faces.) As part of his DVD commentary, which is often terse and enigmatic, Williams calls the T&A videos fun. Even with these drawbacks and omissions, the Williams DVD contains many strong pieces. The Wu-Tang Clan's "Can It Be All So Simple" reflects a very different image of black urban life from that of Romanek's "99 Problems" or Spike Jonze's video for The Notorious B.I.G.'s "Sky's the Limit."

If we consider the Palm DVD collection in relation to Williams's large oeuvre we can begin to locate his style. His performers' expressions are inviting, relaxed, and legible. The figures have a comic-book monumentality, as if they'd been blown up by 15 percent. Does Williams's interest in concave and convex space contribute to this larger-than-life presence? Does camera placement and movement also help to inflate the performers? Dollies, tracks, pans, arcs, and trucks (most frequently low-angle) trace rudimentary shapes, aptly showcasing melodic contours; the camera movement against the music produces a gridding of audiovisual space, subtly “theopoetsizing” the performer even as she projects an intimate charisma. Let's take a few examples: Dr. Dre's "California Love" contains a geodesic dome with a camera continually dollying around it. TLC's "No Scrubs" takes place in a horizontal tube—like environment and the camera tracks left and right but rarely presses in. There are musical corollaries here: We circle around in "California Love" because of the looping of the main hook and Roger Troutman's bird-like vocoder, which suggests circling flight.
The camera in "No Scrubs" stays at a distance because the "no" keeps us at bay. Busta Rhymes's "Woo Ha," on the other hand, repeatedly tracks in and out to highlight the song's insistent six-note rhythmic figure. Viewed silently, the stripped-down elegance of Williams's camera movement comes to the fore, along with the way a song's hook or turn toward the chorus is underscored with a somewhat different gesture. Edits come slightly off the beat, adding a bit of friction. In "No Scrubs" we sense the negative space around the sci-fi female rappers: close-up they seem godlike, but at a distance, they're like dolls.

Besides the mostly rounded spaces, Williams's colors are broadly painted primaries or pastels—shades culturally linked with women and children. Smooth and shiny surfaces bring the color to the fore. This telescoping also shows off a performer, giving them additional monumentality. As with most music video directors, Williams uses loaded imagery. His trademark is short, two- to three-shot vignettes carrying an aura of incompleteness, and highlighting shared anxieties relating to class, sexuality, race, or gender. (Note, in LL Cool J's "Doin' It," the shots surrounding a peepshow, as well as a woman slithering on a rug.) Most strikingly Williams is sensitive to the fact that music disseminates, flows outward, and seems ever-generative (as Chion has noted as well). Images of plenitude suggest hope as well as abundance. Most significant, directors eventually become aware of their signature tropes and work to capitalize on them. Williams's early videos contain fountains or fireworks. In "Can't Tell Me Nothing," for Kanye West, Williams traces diamond-shaped, laser-like patterns across twenty edits, culminating with the diamond pinpointed and centered within a close-up of West's ear. Rounded shapes at the beginning and end initiate this pattern.

Williams's DVD interview suggests he aims to create a different sort of working relationship with actors, one that emphasizes a sense of family and community (although he can start to sound like the Godfather). The intimacy and relaxed poise of the performers derives most likely from this collaboration.

Spike Jonze

Before directing music videos, Spike Jonze was a skateboarder and surfer who made sports documentaries. His work continues to focus on physicality and social roles. Jonze's videos incorporate gymnastics and dance competitions, as well as other demonstrations of physical prowess: performers on fire, running down streets, or delivering lyrics in reverse as they hop backward through city streets. Yet it's the opposite of Leni Riefenstahl's Olympia: here beauty is to be found in the body's awkwardness. Jonze depicts a wide range of movement—gawky, graceful, aggressive, vulnerable—all suggested quickly through the performer's body while the shots fall more leisurely against the music. Athleticism so permeates Jonze's ways of depicting musical experience that it becomes a part of the camera's role: the camera hugs the sidewalk like a skateboarder, or rushes forward and does a 360 as if riding a wave. Growing up as the son of a Spiegel catalog mogul, Jonze may have found conventional social roles a little strange. From his video for Fatboy Slim's "Praise You," featuring the "Torrance Community Dance Troupe," to his remake of Happy Days for Weezer, Jonze acts like an anthropologist in the field. Like Gondry's, his style deliberately reflects sandbox aesthetics. Jonze likes working-class uniforms as well as funny-looking trucks.

The Palm DVD collection reveals something about Jonze's relation to music. His videos often begin with a simple conceit: it might be a television sitcom trailer, or someone dressed up in a giant dog suit with a broken leg and a boombox walking around LA. These witty one-offs are charming. The mechanism is set to go, and then two-thirds into the piece there's an interesting turn. Since pop songs tend to possess a lyric rather than teleological structure (choruses, verses, and bridges), we wonder if Jonze picks up an underlying narrative curve already present in the music, or if we have the tendency to tie narrative patterns of conflict and resolution to everything we watch. One of his best videos, the Beastie Boys' "Sabotage," pays homage to the title sequence of Kojak as a game of role-playing and dress-up, as the band members excitedly jump across buildings and kick down doors. Another memorable effort, Fatboy Slim's "Weapon of Choice," features Christopher Walken in an empty corporate hotel as an aging Fred Astaire dancing to the music while lip-syncing to bassist Bootsy Collins's processed voice. As in many music videos, there's a suggestion that the performer has been overcome by outside forces—film, in the act of viewing, or music, in the act of listening? —and that his status has become uncertain. Is Walken a weapon of choice? What powers does he have?

Jonze's mysterious aporias stem partly from a reterritorialization of space. After Jonze has set the stage, the film theater entrance, and the hotel lobby to music, they suggest potentials for new use. (Who wouldn't want to prance, somersault, stalk, and fly through corporate hotels, lobbies, and escalators?) In Jonze's videos songs re-encode the ways spaces feel and bodies move. The director seems charmed as well by the strangeness of animation. What gets Christopher Walken moving or a mailbox dancing? His music videos intimate new modes of cause and effect, in which sound might be an agent.

A closer look at Björk's "Oh So Quiet" and the Beastie Boys' "Sabotage" reveals how these elements come into play. "Oh So Quiet" sets the Hollywood musical in working-class, suburban LA, within an auto parts store and outdoors in the street. The video poses questions about the nature of the musical—its format, artifact, history—as well as the musical's relation to music
video. One wonders whether the joie de vivre of big-band jazz derives from particular musical elements—the horn stings, the swing rhythms, the thickness of the voicing. How much of the music's urbanity and sexual sophistication still pertains to us? And are there gestures that would seem to work only with this music? In Björk's remake, Jonze's dancers clump and jut out their arms and legs, skirts and umbrellas twirling. Cunningham, Gondry, and Jonze all reference Busby Berkeley's overhead dance formations. (What in this imagery might directors find that suits today's pop music? Of all the Hollywood musical's features, why this?) Jonze binds images to sections of music. Against shots of Björk peeking through tires are juxtaposed the camera's swish-pan shots across tires stacked horizontally in rows: the cross-cutting between this material pulls us out of the verse and into the chorus. The chorus's enormous big-band sounds produce streetwise, explosive, giddy, collective activity, as well as overhead and crane shots. Can we find a progressive political sentiment here, or only nostalgia? The song sections tied to slowed-down visuals of Björk walking, as she sings to and embraces herself, present a different rhetoric, as if raising questions about the difference between then and now—who also does Björk sing to, and how should we respond as viewers?11

"Sabotage" breaks all moving elements—the camera, characters, and objects—into two groups: those that defy gravity, and those that dart in and freeze. These two groups of movement match corresponding musical features. The fast yet sludgy guitar's pulse alongside the rapping conjoin with the leaping elements, while dotted rhythms of the snare drum connect with visual elements that seek-and-hold. The video creates an impressive gestural specificity. People don't just walk—they have a lift to their step. Cars wing over hills. The actors take the stairs with splayed feet; and then we lurch (the press-in-and-hold). One notes also the ways gestures become incrementally grander as the video unfolds: toward the end a body is hurled off a bridge and takes a long, slow-mo dive; a camera swoops in on a split screen, zeroing in on a duct-taped man's face and a time-bomb. Spike Jonze's paths through audiovisual relations can sometimes lead to dangerous ends.

Chris Cunningham

Of the Palm DVD directors, Chris Cunningham projects the greatest faith in music's powers to alter our experience and modify the material world. Aphex Twin's "Come To Daddy" intimates that sound generates the birth of a giant mutant who, through its screams' air blasts, nearly topples an elderly woman. Is it a surge of electricity or of sound that fires up the video's abandoned TV sets? Chris Cunningham's videos work by encouraging us to inhabit on-screen bodies who possess something strange. As viewers we may bind to the musculature or mechanical structure of the figure and feel different. In "Frozen," Madonna appears in a black satin kabuki/Victorian dress and hovers in a dark sky over desert flats. Portishead's "Only You" possesses characters who float in a kind of ether between ominous, run-down buildings. Björk's "All Is Full of Love" shows two cyborgs making out. In Aphex Twin's "Windowlicker," nubile, mostly African American bikinied female bodies carry prosthetic heads or the head of the lead singer, who is not what they are: with his fatuous grin, he resembles a somewhat maniacal, slovenly European American male.

Cunningham's videos exploit a principle once observed by film composer Bernard Herrmann—film music can seek out objects and animate them. Cunningham's videos give us opportunities to reorient our bodies: testing a different tauntness, a different throw. Some of his most graceful visual analogies for musical materials relate to speed and tempo. The techno-trance in "Frozen" conjoints with Madonna's suspended equipoise in the night sky, her black robes billowing out. The slow pulse of Portishead's "Only You" is stitched to people drifting underwater, while the song's fast turnarounds and record-scratching links the characters' suddenly jittery movements. In Aphex Twin's "Windowlicker" the track's punctuating attacks attach to the visual's single flash-frames. Each Palm director has a specific way of experiencing the body. Jonze's figures aim for an athletic, quirky individualism. Romanek's characters perform all kinds of activities but they almost never dance.12 Cunningham prefers keeping figures still or having them move slowly against the music; the music streams past them or seems to flow through their bodies. Cunningham seeks a focused stillness. But Cunningham's sometimes robotic chilliness can be balanced by beauty and grace: it is the microrhythms, as Michel Chion has called them, local changes in light, water, and wind as they respond to musical changes, that define Cunningham's style.13 In the Portishead video (shot underwater with the air bubbles excised so that we do not know where we are), hair floats like anemones; in "All Is Full of Love" sparks fly and water drips sensuously against white metal.

Without the hope of a narrative, music video directors create drama through a more limited repertoire. Cunningham suggests a sense of threat through the fracture, transformation, or faulty workings of machines and bodies. In "Frozen" ominous Dobermans and crows survey the landscape, overshadowing the human; in Björk's "All Is Full of Love" machines risk replication, repair, and failure; in Afrika Bambaataa's "Afrika Shox" body parts fall off; in Squarepusher's "Come on My Selector" limbs morph into animal appendages.

There is something disquieting about Cunningham's work—pretty, but it leaves an aftertaste. Is it that he works with taboo subject positions, or does he possess a subtle mean streak? "Windowlicker" may encourage the viewer to empathize with the dancers, but it also posits a visceral kind of empathy. In "Windowlicker" and "Emerald," from the video's slide show, the拥抱s stick in the throat. Cunningham's videos may also serve as a conduit for viewers to project their own desires and fears; this is his magic and the twin horns of his fascination.

A Music Video Canon?
wonder whether music videos run mainly on images of pleasure, most readily achieved through bounteous flesh. But when pleasure is disrupted, how do we respond? The image is carefully titrated to elicit a balanced proportion between engagement and repulsion: the youthful bodies pull us in, and the grotesqueries keep us at bay. Nicholas Cook points out that music-image relations are volatile; when music and image are put together, a new, unpredictable product emerges.14 “Windowlicker” sounds slower and prettier in the video than on its own. The video’s phantasmagorical, hybridized, ambiguously raced and gendered bodies might work on the viewer like a first encounter with Godzilla on film: the gorgeous cry in tandem with the mammoth body makes us wonder, “Is this monster threatening, lovable, or of this world?” Perhaps music video is most interesting when the image offers cultural associations and affective responses different from those we associate with the music, and the viewer is asked to resolve this cultural disconnect. Can we learn to love “Windowlicker”? I can. But I need to work at it.

In some moods we may feel that music videos are not art, but commercials, or that they damage the listener’s ability to forge a relationship with a song. The supplementary materials included with the Palm DVDs reveal that the directors themselves think of and experience music video as art. Even if they disrupt some sort of private listening experience, music videos also give us something: they teach us about a song. As an encapsulation of music video, Palm’s contribution is only a first step. But it does provide us with a larger body of work to share and talk about.

Afterword

ACCELERATED AESTHETICS

A NEW LEXICON OF TIME, SPACE, AND RHYTHM

It can feel delirious trying to be open to everything—YouTube, cinema, music video, television, video games—wishing to know and take it all in. It’s an absurd desire, of course, as media content proliferates exponentially. Across the globe populations are participating as producers, and vast quantities of historical content are being rediscovered and uploaded, every moment. The mediascape starts to resemble a world, and to see it all might be a kind of overwhelming sublime. Such a stance has rewards—it means nothing less than the dream of being interested in almost everything.

But for this chapter we might resist the lure of ubiquity and adopt a more restricted perspective: for the first time we have seemingly unlimited access to an array of digitally enhanced media that present new configurations of time and space. With our smart devices we can conjure up these media instantly, anywhere, often jarringly, with one clip up against another. We also access these heightened segments through home and work computers, or as brief moments embedded in feature films, video games, television shows, and trailers: we may become facile and fleet as we shift attention from one experiential mode to another. Now, I can’t say there’s an exact homology, or determine cause-and-effect relations, but I’d like to note that at the same time as we have digitally enhanced, aesthetically accelerated media, our work and leisure has become infiltrated by global financial and work flows that themselves are digitally enabled.

In other words, contemporary digital media present forms of space, time, and rhythm we haven’t seen before, and these new forms bear some similarities to contemporary experiences like work speedup, multitasking, and just-in-time labor. While a Frankfurt School perspective might note that forms of entertainment replicate labor so we can better toil under our oppressive conditions, Marshall McLuhan might claim that the digital has infiltrated entertainment, finance, and labor, and hence there’s a homology between them.1 My intuition