and he sang “America the Beautiful” over abandoned American factories and offshore tax havens in the Cayman islands. But the campaigns seemed to get especially nasty with a utilitarian “whatever it takes to win.” I lived in California, a state already slated to one party, so no one bothered much to campaign where I was. The Obama campaign got gritty, micro-targeting potential voters through data mining. Email would be sent to you based on perceived affiliation (if I went to a church, I’d get a more “spiritual” email message). The Democrats decided that foot soldiers and door-to-door campaigning were most effective. Much activity moved over to Twitter. I and many experienced amusement over Anne Romney’s comment of “You people” and “Eastwooding.” But for many of my friends and me, 2012 was not as joyous as 2008. In 2008, regardless of your party affiliation, so many participants wanted their voices heard. I hope for an efflorescence of participation again.

CHAPTER 9

Reconfiguring Music Video

BEYONCÉ’S “VIDEO PHONE”

Today not much is left of the music video industry. Profits have fallen, budgets have been slashed, and fewer videos are being made. Videos today can look like they’re aping devices of the 80s, as if what we saw then wasn’t reflective of musical styles or a zeitgeist but rather economics. While it has always been difficult to make a living directing music video, now even the top directors tend to say, “I’m going on vacation—I’m going to direct a music video” because they don’t get paid for what they do.

I’m hopeful, however. Artists and technicians within other genres and media are laboring under similar constraints. (From 2008 to 2013 the New York Times dramatically cut staff and shut down foreign bureaus, but the company still plans for an uptick.) Music video has always been mutable. I think it will survive this transition. Perhaps also, this moment presents an opportunity. If we listen carefully and attend patiently, we’ll learn new things about the possibilities of the form.

I’ve claimed that music video is strange and getting stranger. Perusing the Internet produces unusual experiences: as we come across videos set adrift between election news clips, exhortations about how to keep your mate sexually engaged, and the newest fad diets, or click among streams of text, snapshots, and other YouTube links, music videos can now become the anchor rather than the source of discontinuity. Has the form of music video become the supertext? Music video’s elongations and instances of condensation, its alternating thickets and wide-open spaces, map onto the web’s larger structures. Do the web’s simultaneous windows and jumpy advertising also shape music video aesthetics? On a webpage, music videos compete with lurid pop-up ads and other scrolling devices. So why do the song and image project further than they ever did? The videos themselves still want to claim a liberatory otherness: “I kissed a girl and I liked it.”

Does music video’s true home now reside elsewhere—in the film trailer, the mashup, the wedding video, the visual arts flash project, the DIY (do it yourself)
oriented clips on YouTube now reflect an aesthetic different from those of earlier genres on television or cable. We can begin to understand today’s music video if we consider some of the aesthetic features that define YouTube: (1) pulse, reiteration, and other forms of musicality; (2) irreality and weightlessness (tied to low-resolution and the digital); (3) scale and graphic values; (4) unusual causal relations; (5) variability and intertextuality; (6) humor and parody; (7) volatility and condensation; and (8) formal replication of the web. I’ll apply these YouTube-oriented features to a music video most viewers would identify as traditionally belonging to the genre (here, a performance set against a prerecorded song, released by a major record company, and designed to draw attention to the song and sell it). My case study will be the recent video by Hype Williams for Beyoncé and Lady Gaga’s song “Video Phone,” shot in October 2009.

But before I consider “Video Phone,” let me take a moment to ask how we might think about YouTube.3 Music video is making a strong global comeback because of the new platform. The number of clips on the site stretches to the sublime—YouTube streams 1.2 billion videos a day, enough for every person on the planet with Internet to watch a clip each day.14 As the site’s number-one streamed content, music video consumption is dramatically up. It’s the perfect form to quickly set the pulse of our daily lives, as well as to grab a moment’s respite while websurfing or engaging in repetitive work. Music video clips on YouTube might help us gain the pulse of today’s world: perhaps in our heteroglot but connected environment, these clips will help global citizens discover a shared rhythm. The eruptions of enthusiasm for Psy’s “Gangnam Style,” Carly Rae Jepsen’s “Call Me Maybe,” and “The Harlem Shake” suggest so.15 YouTube and music video raise many questions, more than this chapter can address.

There are new modes of attention, forms of cross-cultural exchange and ideological content; there have been shifts among industry personnel, amateur media-makers, and audiences; and many have had to deal with shrinking budgets, bandwidth, and screen-size.16

Several scholars have offered ways to consider YouTube, but an overarching description of the platform is still lacking. Alex Juhasz claims that YouTube fails to build communities. For her, YouTube is a space of commercialism and further reification of mainstream media.17 Michael Wetsch and Henry Jenkins, on the other hand, celebrate the ways the site makes possible new identities, sexualities, and modes of interaction. They claim YouTube fosters community and acts as an agent for self-expression.18 Julie Russo documents remix culture, especially in gendered and gay communities,19 while David Gurney has written about YouTube humor.20 I seek to locate aesthetic and formal principles present in many YouTube clips that have also infiltrated music video.

In these next sections I’ll first consider an individual feature of YouTube (like reiteration and pulse) and provide some examples. Then I’ll consider this feature...
in light of Beyoncé and Lady Gaga’s “Video Phone.” (Any YouTube or music video clip may embody a number of these features, though not all.) Recent music videos and YouTube clips today feel like open territory; often these features can appear distorted and strange. As we’ll see, this is strikingly so for Hype Williams’s video for “Video Phone” by Beyoncé and Lady Gaga.

1) Reiteration and Pulse

YouTube’s most prominent aesthetic seems to be insistent reiteration. Forms include 1+1+1+1 or AAAAAAAAAAAAAAB. There are the goofy or overly anthropomorphized animals who repetitively circle around or chew their food like “Gizmo Flushes” or “The Sneezy Baby Panda.” Suddenly at the clip’s close the animal might perform an action that departs from its previous activities through a slight, but surprising turn. All of the vlogs and homemade family documentaries of events seem to lead to more repetitive compilation clips: falls out of chairs, the prettiest smile. Mashups seem to compress the phenomenon even more, splicing together clip after clip until it takes on a pulse. Straight-ahead music videos have taken on an insistent pulse, too, like “El Sonidito” or “Sunday Afternoon.”

We might consider any parameter in light of repetition, including movement within the frame, color, editing, and so on. YouTube lyrics might be one of the most insistent features. “The New Llama Song!!!!!!,” for example, has an attenuated vocabulary and a very strong earworm. A lot of text is rapidly delivered and hard to make out, though it’s accompanied by subtitles; then an emphatic “llama, llama, duck” returns. In “Two Talking Cats: Two in One,” garrulous kittens simply meow back and forth to one another. Even in “Derrida Bears” (also known as “Reading and Time: a dialectic between academic expectation and academic frustration”) the bright language of academe becomes stripped down to the simple message of “You must do it!” and “I refuse to.” The four-letter words become more and more frequent, finally becoming the only viable option.

Much of YouTube’s content—talk shows and cooking shows—looks like what once appeared on television. But something feels different, perhaps related to the image-quality, scale, duration, or YouTube’s conversations with other media on the site. I feel more strongly a sense of articulation and pulse with YouTube clips than I do with television. A voice intoning “Today I’m going to talk about …” or “Now I’m going to move the cursor …” on YouTube remind me of the days before and after this assertion, as well as of the gestures that preceeded and might follow. Perhaps a different species, but exhibiting a similar phenomenon, the YouTube clips with people talking quickly and rapid editing calls attention to the punctuation of the cut and the initial onsets of the voice.

The quintessential YouTube clips, the user-created engagements with babies and animals, most often last less than 50 seconds. In these the subject participates in some self-contained activity that rises and falls. Then, as we draw to a close, “wham!”: something unexpected occurs as an explosive event (the panda sneezes, the raccoon steals the rug). The new turn calls into question the rhythms of everything that has appeared before.

Reiteration is predominant in today’s media for many reasons including aesthetics, production practices, consumers’ level of training, contemporary technology, and sociocultural contexts. Perhaps most influential are the pace and demands of business and leisure time, which have been accelerating. Today’s rhythms of work and leisure could be considered as comprised of overlapping patterns; the emails, the cell-phone texts, the tweets, the person speaking next to us, the canned music streaming through an ear as we wait in a phone queue. YouTube clips provide rhythms we can activate and control. Sometimes they may go faster or slower than those swirling around us, but within the multiple streams that we participate in, we have the possibility to dip in and out of them. YouTube clips can move at an extremely fast pace. Once we’ve experienced such a compressed sense of time we may feel recharged and ready to enter what we perceive as a more slowly moving real world.

Competition among media also encourages obsessive repetition. YouTube’s response to the hyperintensified CGI-laden blockbuster-seeking new digital cinema and to video games may be to insist even more strenuously on its importance. The nagging quality may not only pull viewers away from other YouTube clips and more distant websites but also away from all external screens. Reiteration has an aesthetic function as well. Beyond the YouTube clip’s borders, and bracketed within the monitor’s frame, marks and objects of odd sizes and colors litter the visual field. A regular, aggressive pulse suggested by a YouTube clip helps normalize and organize this disorderly activity.

Reiteration has also to do with consumption compulsion. When the mega popular YouTube “Shoes” s lead singer, dressed in drag, sings “Shoes” in the most affectless style possible, over and over, s/he suggests that repetition is tied to the impulse to buy, buy, consume, consume, start over. Yet as Gilles Deleuze would argue, with the Darwinian turn come a slight difference.

The production practices of YouTube—including the DIY aesthetic—exert a strong influence. Fans with no training want to make something. With favorite materials, today’s makers jump in with their editing software and get going. Near the two-minute mark, they may realize that they’ve locked themselves into a pattern without much form, but they’re stuck—AAAAA, or ABABABABABAB. Professional makers with more training may pick up on this style, because it seems like the next big thing. Such processes spread like a contagion, transforming culture on a global scale.
As I've suggested, the most-viewed content on YouTube—professional music videos—are riven with repetition. They do this in part by foregrounding songs, which create repetition through rhythm, chord progressions, repeating sections, and recurring melodic, timbral, and other hook-like material. Other YouTube clips may organize themselves around this content. Almost all amateur viral videos seem stuck in a loop too. Orange in "The Annoying Orange" says, "I want hey hey. I'm orange. I'm apple. Hey orange. Hey apple. Hey Hey orange." "Nyan Cat [original]" foregrounds a two-bar ditty that repeats with slight variation, and a low-res dot-matrix drawing of a cat that continually speeds through the frame's center. While the feline's body remains inert, except for a single periodic hitch, its feet cycle around and around, generating a rainbow trail against a grayish-blue background and a few points signifying snowflakes. "Gangnam Style," rated as YouTube's most viewed clip, and a professionally produced music video, has a "waho, waho, waho" that threatens to become stuck in permanent repeat. The many amateur versions of "The Harlem Shake" foreground an "earworm" sonic fragment too, seemingly taking a cue from "Gangnam Style." After counting a repetitive "Hey," "Hey," "Hey, hey, hey, hey," "The Harlem Shake" switches into a looser and freer section, as if it has been restructured like a devolution. But if we attend carefully we'll notice that this second, post-transformation section is looped too, and the loop only stops once the audio track runs down.

THE CASE STUDY—BEYONCÉ AND LADY GAGA'S "VIDEO PHONE"

Pop music has always employed techniques of reiteration. But something is different now. Many bloggers and journalists have noted that Beyoncé's most recent songs contain earworms—"Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)" seems to get lodged in people's brains and won't let go. The words "Video Phone" can sound like an excerpt to a lyric from "Single Ladies." Perhaps simple phrases like "put a ring on it" and "call me on the phone" repeated over and over, embedded in an over-dubbed chorus of real and synthesized voices, help drive the sound into the brain (the sounds both ring and reverberate and suggest calls for action). In these videos, Beyoncé's hips circling around and around alongside the musical hook reinforces the pattern. Other sources of repetition: Lady Gaga's songs are highly identifiable, and form a sound world of their own; since we return to Gaga's performance throughout the song, her professional, highly polished approach, as it returns, may reinforce a sense of repetition. The "Video Phone" song proper also contains much repetition. (In the upper registers, a synthesizer patch spends most of its time cycling among a few pitches, for example.)

Many elements in "Video Phone"'s imagery feature reiteration. The opening, strobing overlays as a Reservoir Dogs–like bevy of men and Beyoncé strut past lonely warehouses (see figure 9.1a), suggest instability. Once the video starts proper, the first series of Beyoncé's multiplying are formed through two types of visual imagery: (1) echoed grayed-out heads filling out the left- and right-hand sides of the frame (as if they were scroll bars for videogames), with these gray heads beginning to multiply; and (2) Beyoncé's dancing in the center of the frame with echoed, streaming images trailing after her. Together these suggest an infinite regress. Cameramen with their camera heads also begin to reproduce (see figures 9.1b and 9.1c). Beyoncé and Gaga, as women lined up in chairs, become exchangeable, rotatable. Visually this video suggests 80s music video aesthetics, with its constant deployment of different dresses, setups, and color backgrounds. (The videos for Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance with Somebody," directed in 1985 by Brian Grant, and for Neneh Cherry's "Buffalo Stance," directed in 1989 by John Maybury, are touchstones.) But this video seems more adept and concerted in its effects. The setups feel reiterative. Though there is some cross-bleeding, the basic pattern is one after another in a series, with the series becoming more important than teleological drive. But here the reiteration is able to carry us into new realms. More is at stake: sex for profit, pleasure, acceptance, power, or war.

On YouTube, repetition is often combined with boredom and tedium. Repetition, of course, can also be paired with a kind of jacked-up, unrelenting excitement, like the songs of Katy Perry, but "Video Phone" is a case of the former. The finger snaps are desultory, often lagging behind the beat. The synthesizer patch in the upper register conveys ennui, and the exotic melody in the mid-range sounds like an inexpensive 8-bit Casio sound from the mid 80s—thin and tinny. The drums in the rhythm section seem cheap—sometimes sounding like banging on trash-can lids, and sometimes like tapping on heavy plastic. This arrangement does not suggest money or luxury—there are no live strings, for example. "Watch me on your video phone" sounds like a corporate slogan we're consigned to hear over and over.

Figure 9.1a–c Video Phone's mashup aesthetics: the image points to Reservoir Dogs and the soundtrack to Sergio Leone's spaghetti Westerns. "Video Phone"'s sense of repetition is established through digital trails and multiplying cameramen.
2) Digital Swerve—Irreality and Weightlessness

It has often been claimed that analog and digital media have different properties, and that celluloid, videotape, and digital media possess important distinctions. Though celluloid film shares some features with the digital—the single frames (all 1's), the film projector’s beam of light as it flashes on and off (0, 1's), and the strip’s succession (more 0’s and 1’s)—it departs through a more immediate connection with the world.33 For André Bazin film functions as a mask of the world, an analog, a replica; light falling on the randomly placed silver halides leave a mark or trace, something directly from the world remains on the film.34 Film also possesses contradictory pulls that shadow our own biological processes. As Laura Mulvey argues, the motoric projector and the frame’s constant passing resembles our own life drives for power, sex, reproduction.35 Half of the film is comprised of stillness—a black, a darkness that occurs in the transition from frame to frame, marking it as thanatos, a death drive.

According to David Rodowick, the digital departs from film aesthetics, because it’s a transcriptive rather than an analog process.36 Digital technologies employ a grid that remains constant as pixels switch on and off. The electronic light constantly oscillates, appearing and vanishing, yet never completely rests. I’d claim that digital music, a phantom representation in its own right, in tandem with the digital image creates a monstrously hybrid automaton. As Jonathan Sterne argues, the soundtrack is digital as well but perceptually the soundtrack provides a more continuous function.37 In The Day the Earth Stood Still (2008, Scott Derrickson), the globe and locusts seem gossamer-like. In Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen (2009, Michael Bay), metal machine monsters melt into ball bearings or turn into filament-dust. In Speed Racer (2008, Andy and Lana Wachowski), cars careening into each other sometimes go right through another as if they were ghosts. At these moments the soundtrack is particularly blustery. The digital images’ swerve or momentum calls for a shadow schema, a filling in.

Often YouTube’s physics are odd. Vloggers hover near the monitor screen intuiting that if they stay too far away from it, they might drift off. Kitties and baby goats leap and fly. Only the newborns remain grounded. Parkour acrobats take flying leaps from building to building. “Supersonic Freefall” (Felix Baumgartner’s drop from 128,000 feet to the earth) was one of YouTube’s exciting events, and NASA has a YouTube music video of an astronaut in space. Why is this? This is not your normal television. Is it the low-res quality? The small frame? The short length? The distance between the private view and a global reach to all planetary viewers? A stylistic mode that arose out of competition, or a common language that’s infected all clips as they converse with one another? The Gummy Bear YouTube clip might deserve its 322,220,239 hits: the bear’s materiality is compellingly uncertain, switching unpredictably from watercolor to CGI.38

BEYONCÉ AND LADY GAGA’S “VIDEO PHONE”

A lo-res aesthetic hovers over the video. The grayed-out images of Beyoncé’s head against the more luridly colored ones remind us that we might be, or ought to be, watching on a video phone. Flickering images in the video’s opening as well as its first verse (here the lyrics state: “cologne in the air”) destabilize the video. The materials of “Video Phone”—plastic, lyra, and tiger prints—seem cheap, as do the more working-class, Walmart, mass-marketed colors. These visual touches raise questions about whether we can receive pleasure from mainstream, commercial products. Props and costumes might look tossed together; the blue hooded mask and pink jacket suggest an irreality. Beyoncé’s occasional harder chest thrusts, hip bumps, and knee bends seem like an attempt to lock the video down, to stop it from floating free.

Even as “Video Phone” celebrates the ephemeral, transitory, disposable, shiny, and new, it harks back to earlier technologies and eras. At 2:18, we hear the sounds of an antiquated film camera’s or projector’s ticking chatter of claw and unspooling sprocket holes. The older imagery of Josephine Baker and Bettie Page pull us back to an era of peep shows, and Lady Gaga sings old fashioned phrases like “hubba hubba” and “I’ll be your Gene, you’ll be my Brando.” We hear brass horns from a big band. Can we place the clip’s costumes in relation (Josephine Baker, Barbarella, and Bettie Page)? Where should we place ourselves in the media swirl? We don’t know.

3) Scale and Graphic Values

YouTube’s aesthetic values include bold or strongly projected graphic design and well-judged scale. This may be related to the medium and its mode of delivery—a clip’s limited length, its level of resolution, and the forms of attention it encourages. Small environments with low-quality audiovisuals may encourage makers, viewers, and consumers to seek stronger definition. YouTube clips must often garner attention in a competitive environment; many struggle to gain legibility.

What makes a successful YouTube clip? If we can imagine the forms traced as a cartoon and it still speaks, my bet is it has a better shot at success. “The Sneezing Baby Panda,” “Haha Baby,” and “Evolution of Dance” would all make popular cartoons. YouTube clips tend to feature simplistic and evocative representations of the body and shape—either as face, body part, or whole. Clearly legible objects trigger rich affective responses, and they help to quickly give the performer a pseudo-context chairs, cups). Contrasting textures—the shiny and the dull; the smooth, brittle, and rough—also help clips come forward. Color schemes differ from television. There might be an array of unified tones, or these clips might also be luridly pastel or monochrome, but whatever they are, they are designed to hold our attention.
the color scheme there is less room for the widely various, free, or ad-hoc. Space contracts. While long-form media take us in and out of corridors, alleys, countrysides, and intimate spaces, YouTube sticks to single frontal views. YouTube clips have many ways of responding to the small format. In “The Gummy Bear Song” the bear squeezes into the frame, then hops around a lot, all the way from the far distance to the extreme foreground. On the other hand, “Nyan Cat” is just a flat, line-drawn cartoon. The flying aerodynamic kitty gracefully streams across the middle of the frame forever. Neither of these would look quite right on a television screen. Sometimes low-res YouTube clips seem even more valuable for their beat-up look. But the image within the frame is usually a big head, with some ornamental décor toward the back (a hanging T-shirt, a special throw-blanket on the bed). Mishka, the talking dog, looks large and golden, neatly centered on the bed. The five artificed musicians around the guitar in Walk of the Earth’s cover of “Somebody That I Used to Know” become one large hyper-beast. Many of the most popular YouTube clips, like “Gangnam Style,” present their beginnings and endings with a cartoon drawing, as if to acknowledge YouTube’s low bandwidth and small format.39

BEYONCÉ AND LADY GAGA’S “VIDEO PHONE”

Since the early 90s, one strand in Hype Williams’s oeuvre has been minimalist. He’s often worked with simple setups such as a few performers before a blank cyclorama. Nevertheless, his earlier videos were different: the men and women came up to and backed away from the lens; figures in the background established a dense interplay with those in the foreground. The Beyoncé video is all frontal—all direct address. The video seems to be a primer on how to do frontality. (You can pan up the body. Place two heads on the side. Shoot a composition with three-quarters of the body. Use a close-up on the eyes. Create a tableau of three figures, and so on.) Details are blunt: chairs, guns, a large bull’s-eye. Costuming works emblematically to trigger fast associations—all details perform work (Beyoncé’s red pumps have little bows on them—Gaga’s yellow pumps don’t). Yet subtlety is also important, at least on one register. The shapes of shadows shift from shot to shot—circular, ribbed and curved, boxy, or sweeping down from the top of the frame.

4) Causal Relations

Music video can raise questions of cause and effect, foregrounding relations so ambiguous that the music seems to be the engine mobilizing people, objects, and environments.40 In “The Sneezing Baby Panda,” did we know a panda could sneeze? And so hard that it would blow away both mother and baby? What animates that dancer in “Evolution of Dance”? Mexican jumping beans? Why would the little boy in the car’s backseat be so punch-drunk, as if a parent had possibly malevolently slipped him a mickey?

David Rodowick provides a reason for the emphasis on causal relations.41 Our experiences of screens have changed with the computer’s multiple windows we can activate, click through, resize, move, and hide. In video games, too, we enact spatial transformations of the environment within the frame. The ways our gestures transform spatial coordinates as we surf through the web, and participate in the game experience, might, through contagion, be transferred to YouTube. Though we cannot truly modify the inner workings of a clip, the top all-time YouTube clips seem intensely bound up with powerful, obscure causal relations that are in play. We have the illusion that we might control these clips at a meta-level.

The scale of YouTube clips contributes to our sense of power. Many clips have small dimensions that create an illusion of our authority over annoying or overly dependent characters (we can snub them out in an instant). Chris Cocker of “Leave Britney Alone,” Fred Figglehorn of “Fred Loses His Meds,” and Gary Brolsma of “Numa Numa” may be tolerable in miniature, but they’d be unbearable on television.42 The clips wouldn’t have as much charm if they were closer to our size. A second, contradictory impulse: YouTube clips can also seem as perfect as Persian miniatures. Every figure and detail of the landscape can be exquisitely proportioned, and all within the frame can take on a doll-like quality. Perhaps Beyoncé and Lady Gaga’s “Video Phone” projects both aesthetics: the miniature’s perfection, and the viewer’s desire to wield control.

The glitch has become another odd mode of causality. We might call it the meme of today. The glitch has so supersaturated media that definitions have become vague. I’ll define “glitch” here simply as a surprise, such that the viewer wonders whether there’s a technical error. Usually glitches are short-lived and resolve themselves quickly, but they don’t have to. Glitches often appear as a noisy image, or a stutter in the editing, but possibilities are open. The glitch relates to cause and effect because the viewer wonders if he or she or possibly someone should be called upon to do something (where’s the technician?). What’s engendered this? The glitch is potent, because it’s easily replicable and rapidly transmitted. It may mean something to viewers—perhaps the possibility of a time out, or a new way to imagine the world. In “The Harlem Shake,” all of a sudden something may have seized the broadcast and flipped it: we have a new scape. Is it the lone performer, dancing more and more actively as he seemingly revs himself up, or the music, as it’s building intensity, that blows a fuse? This is pure music-video aesthetics. Music video confuses cause and context. In “The Harlem Shake” it did the music cause a sudden transposition of crowds so that
they now so vigorously wiggle and squirm? This clip may be one of the best ways to show how the history of music videos informs the present. Its sudden switch in performance comes out of viewing music videos and thinking about them. We'll see that “Video Phone” also plays with causes and effects.

Beyoncé and Lady Gaga's “Video Phone”

Beyoncé immediately raises questions about power: “Can you handle this?” or “Do you dare watch me?” Are we playing her, or is she playing us? Is she on our phone? Why would a miniature version of Beyoncé, as experienced on YouTube or a cell phone, be more threatening than if she were on cable TV? (Madonna's “Human Nature” and “Open Your Heart,” both directed by Jean-Baptiste Mondino in 1995 and 1986, respectively, have nothing on this.) Inexplicably sometimes the guns go off and sometimes they don't. We hear sounds that suggest orgasm, but can't be sure. What are the triggers that push Beyoncé into what feels like a sexual state? What does she want? Does she need us at all? What if we could randomly access this music video? Would we have a better experience?

And is Beyoncé more of a top or a bottom? She appears to have power here. Chewing gum, she's the bored, jaded sex-worker. But we can't quite gauge her actions—if she wants to, she might walk away. Gaga's relation to Beyoncé is unclear. Are they colleagues sharing a medley or competitors for fame, money, or sexual favors? (Gaga may be performing too hard to chew gum.) Perhaps most uncanny are the soundtrack's voices. We hear women's moans throughout, but it's not always clear to whom they belong. Are the multiples of Beyoncé engaged in their own pleasure? Is it Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, or backing-track singers who moan increasingly as the song progresses? What is the status of the childlike robo-voice saying, “You wanna video me?”

5) Variability and Intertextuality

On all fronts YouTube is loquacious. Avid YouTube users are familiar with the endless riffs on popular clips (these often overwhelm the original, making it near-impossible to locate a sought-after clip). Intertextuality and hybridization occur across platforms, among users, and within clips in almost every domain. YouTube's promiscuous mingling, for example, functions internally within a clip, fracturing its contents even more than music video ever did. Here, while music video often showcased a moment-by-moment shifting aesthetic, YouTube cranks the volubility up a notch. One musical genre on YouTube simply multiplies: performance occurs within multiple frames within the clip, or a figure is multiply duplicated (“Enter Kazoo Man: Metallica Enter Sandman” and “Michael Jackson Medley” are good examples). I predict we'll see these layering practices proliferating.

We can look to film trailers for variability and intertextuality as well. The film trailer for The Spirit (2008, Frank Miller) possesses key features of the new audiovisual aesthetics. Hyper-stylized, it follows a series of affective flashpoints, nimbly crossing media. The Spirit projects a type of intermediality so mercurial that our attention flits speedily among media, only touching surfaces, never ground. An animated line comes into focus and the sound before the drawing helps us identify it as a heart monitor's flatline. Something streams with a whoosh across the frame. We follow it as it becomes a figure leaping off a building. The words “Silken Floss” impress themselves on the frame. We might feel as if we were like a stone skipping across the water. The movement across medial surfaces makes it seem as if we're the hot potato.

Mashups also form a subset of the new intermediality. In a mashup, the edited shots and sounds of a performer can hang as fragments. Other materials sweep past, but the musical hook or image lingers like a pungent smell. If you needed to pare down and carry forward a distilled, perhaps animal-like presence of your beloved performer, this would be it. Often one medium seems to retain its liveliness—either in the music or the image—while the other materials freeze in mechanical repetitions. The live bit pulls apart from a wash of other material pressing through. Any moment can teeter toward something revelatory or lost.

We might extend the idea of a mashup into new territory: a mashup might be a new combination of things we've already seen. These clips' charm depends on their novelty. In Lindsey Stirling's “Crystalize,” a pretty gamine dances while playing her violin to a dubstep arrangement. Well, we might have seen that, but not in the midst of a glacial labyrinth comprised of ice-canyon walls, monoliths, and caves. The clip becomes a sort of wild fusion of an eco-nature documentary, "The Ice Capades,” “America's Got Talent,” and other things. We've also seen several people working together to play a single instrument, but never as finely coordinated as Walk off the Earth's cover of Gotye's "Somebody That I Used to Know.” Remixes and mashups of the most popular YouTube clips, such as skateboarders and kitties, are familiar, but YouTube celebrities sharing screen-time in a professional music video would be novel. "YouTube 2012" is as professionally produced as "Gangnam Style," and it gets kicked off by Psy breaking Walk off the Earth's guitar. "YouTube 2012" has become one of the most popular clips on YouTube.

Beyoncé and Lady Gaga's "Video Phone"

Mashups too may have influenced "Video Phone." One of YouTube's most popular mashups, "Tick Toxic," features rapid cutting between Gwen Stefani and Britney Spears, each shot first establishing and then giving ground to the second performer. 
The clip’s rapid change in mood or tone may have been picked up by “Video Phone,” with an alternation between Gaga and Beyoncé. (Gaga is on record stating that she didn’t want to be dress-up Gaga. She wanted to be a second B.)

As mentioned, variability and intertextuality occurs across all fronts, socioculturally as well as within the clip. “Video Phone” takes place within many forms of conversation. This is the first video Hype Williams made with Beyoncé after the 2009 Grammy Awards, when Kanye West interrupted Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech for “Best Female Video of the Year” by shouting that Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time. Hype Williams may have felt a special pressure to stand by Beyoncé and make the “mother” of all videos, extending the range of people and places she might represent. At the same time as “Video Phone,” Lady Gaga’s “Paparazzi” and “Bad Romance” were in play. The immensely popular Gaga/Beyoncé “Telephone” soon followed, with a promise to serialize these events. In “Telephone,” we might imagine Gaga’s serving prison time for all of her “bad” deeds, like sex trading with Beyoncé in “Video Phone”; poisoning her lover in “Paparazzi”; or selling herself and then killing her trick in “Bad Romance.” (As Beyoncé in “Telephone” notes, she’s “been a bad, bad girl.”) Similarly Tyrese may be poisoned in “Telephone” for responding inappropriately to “Video Phone”’s women. “Video Phone” and “Telephone” share many aesthetics including a sonic low eight-bit rate; collaborative or competitive dancing; and a visual and aural stuttering and breaking up of sound and visual imagery. “Video Phone” is just as intertextual as “Telephone.”

6) Humor and Parody

Parody permeates the web. DIYers embrace this compositional strategy because it’s so easy to implement. You take the commercial or the television skit and you redo it: you can restage it or remix it—easy approaches include intercutting two or more clips and adding or deleting layers. In the anonymity of the web, YouTube makers are in search of a ground—your sarcastic take immediately places you in relation to a select group of viewers as well as the producers and fans of the original material. Your parody, now tied to original content, piggybacks on an already-accrued attention. Sarcasm also pierces us. Anything that pushes against social norms tends to grab attention.

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Since any clip might be parodied, remixed, or just made to look foolish, many YouTube clips adopt a knowing stance. “Video Phone” works this way. You might attempt a campy remake with college-bound males, but the video has already anticipated that. It’s already envisioned all the permutations. Already, there are spoofs and parodies of “Video Phone” on the web. It’s something two or more boys or girls can do in their bedrooms. Props are easy to make. Do you have some sheets and several pairs of tights? Everyone’s got a water gun or can pick one up at the local five-and-dime. “Telephone”’s funny gowns made of unhemmed swatches of cloth pay homage to this.

7) Volubility and Condensation

YouTube clips that have garnered over a million hits may elicit aggressive wishes and unconscious taboo desires in the deepest Freudian sense. In “Numa Numa,” a subtle allusion to Humpty Dumpty is going on. Gary Brolsma’s singing karaoke alongside a high, male but feminine-sounding falsetto pushes what’s unfolding into a state of delirium. His facial gestures are so quick and malleable he becomes a Disney animation. The clip conjures forth childhood fantasies of play and innocence, along with more adult anxieties concerning control and sexual desire. Brolsma’s someone we might have ridiculed as kids, but he’s also very attractive in his own way.

YouTube is full of puns, jokes, and returns to childhood. Sanctioned and illicit stories can exist simultaneously. New digital technologies enable media to hover between multiple meanings—threads can be kept active throughout the clip or film, appearing and submerging as their presence becomes more and less important. In Lady Gaga and Jonas Åkerlund’s “Paparazzi,” Gaga is either a woman who’s been wronged, and who fights to make a comeback, or a cold-hearted calculating murderer who deserves to be placed behind bars, but there’s no way to tell. In Life of Pi, digital environments and fine use of post-production color enable both a spiritual, religious story and a Machiavellian, tooth-and-claw, Darwinian one. For a viewer, this shimmer creates a Wittgenstein duck-rabbit effect.

The YouTube clip “MeTube: August sings Carmen ‘Habanera’” touches on so many styles and genres that it could be called a “postmodern retro-digital Germanopunk crypto-geriatric Eurotrash parody.” Socially sanctioned and disallowed behavior shimmer in the clip, failing to resolve. In “Habanera” August sings along with an old cassette tape recording of opera singer Maria Callas, while his mother toils around serving milk and cookies. The setting is a rundown British flat, with old peeling, floral wallpaper, a kitchen table, and a piano, and the images look like low-res, old-school television footage. Either August’s singing; a robot (which has morphed out of August’s tape recorder and now has his head in it); one or two musicians who have suddenly shown up, sat down, and started playing in the background (one wears full leather regalia); a repetitive glitch and sudden color processing; or the music enable surprising turns.
The drab, desaturated grey-beige living room shifts to a more deeply saturated color-scape of a nightclub, with pockets of deep, brilliant red that fail to resolve. Highbrow musical salons and disco infernos (mom dances too) shuttle by, and August dresses up as Carmen and a trovador. At the clip’s conclusion we’re snagged back to the original abject apartment, but the wonderful dreamscapes or potentially real rehearsal still hover. As is often true for music video, we don’t know what’s causing what. Perhaps a man’s love for Maria Callas has engendered this fantasia, but it just as easily could be the robot’s doing, or the background musicians who want to hang out at the house, or the mother, or the technology, or—most likely—the music. It’s YouTube, music video, and a TV serial drama. It’s high and low. August and Carmen’s glitch enables a progressive image, facilitating gay culture in the heart of the family.

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To give a sense of the ways condensation works in “Video Phone,” let me provide a more extended analysis of the clip, focusing on the social issues and psychic material called forth. Music video has always worked with condensation and a plurality of meaning, but “Video Phone” seems like a departure from the past, with its reduced materials yet complex signifiers. If we take seriously the video’s multitude of visual and aural signs, Hype Williams, Beyoncé, and Lady Gaga seem remarkably expansive, willing to take over vast swaths of global and national discourse. The clip shimmers between meanings. One of two trajectories for “Video Phone” could be read as less progressive, while another one could be more. The music video’s allure stems from its ability to hold these multiple perspectives simultaneously.

A first trajectory: In “Video Phone” Beyoncé becomes our new Bettie Page, our all-around American pinup girl for the troops in Afghanistan and Iraq (see figure 9.2a). Does her power and beauty transsubstantiate our guilt over torture? Cameramen shoot her buttocks, and then she threatens men who are hooded and bound (see figure 9.2b). We take the pictures on our cell phone. Yet her roles as B-girl and shy pinup along with the semiotics of her costume—an oversized T-shirt embroidered with an alien’s head drawn in Third World colors, sporting the word “peace,” a jaunty beret, and both male and female gender-symbol earrings—provide a more hopeful second trajectory (see figure 9.2c). The video’s color palette—moving through a trajectory from red and black to deep pink, blue and gray, pastel colors of baby pink, blue, and yellow to Third World (possibly Jamaican) colors of orange, green, red, and black, as well as the rising sun emblem of World War II Japan, point to a transnational, Third World, perhaps more politically progressive and inclusive politics.

A history of popular culture and performance, including African American culture, is also encapsulated. Beyoncé’s first dance is a direct homage to Josephine Baker. Beyoncé’s movements, long waving braid, and flared miniskirt are a few references (one might be tempted to expand the exotic elements, adding drumbeats and palm trees). Howard Hawks’s film Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953) is also referenced through Beyoncé’s and Gaga’s costumes of long satin gloves and dress, the performers’ carefully choreographed work with chairs, and Beyoncé’s readjusting of her breasts and bra. Many odd elements that might seem like loose ends appear too—early-80s album covers by Roxy Music and The Residents; 1980s big-shouldered military-style fashion; the work of Robert Mapplethorpe and Kenneth Anger; femme fatales like Yvonne De Carlo; films like Reservoir Dogs (1992), Barbarella (1968), and the 007 series; and an homage to women participating in more male working-class pursuits such as welding, motorcycle riding, and driving big cars. Can all of these varied images of pop culture, sexuality, and global power be put into a meaningful relation?

“Video Phone” gains cohesion through its suggestion of an arc of desire culminating in orgasm. Music video directors have become more skilled at suggesting such an arc: Francis Lawrence’s video for Lady Gaga, entitled “Bad Romance” (2009), similarly, suggests a wide range of types of pleasures, all within five minutes. “Video Phone”’s closing shots perhaps allude to Luis Buñuel’s opening for Un Chien Andalou (1929) with its slash through the eye. Both a gun in “Video Phone,” and a knife in Un Chien Andalou, suggest penetration.

“Video Phone” could be seen as gay identified. Beyoncé and Lady Gaga are divas loved by both the gay community and young women (many in the gay community were very excited that Gaga might have been transgendered; Lady Gaga has later denied this.30 Beyoncé’s big T-shirt (see figure 9.2c) might comment on Jamaica’s homophobia: embossed with an alien wearing both male and...
female gender-symboled earrings, it might speak in code about present-day international gay rights: for example, from 2009 until 2013, a law has been circulating in Uganda’s courts and legislature to put homosexuals in prison. Those convicted of “aggravated” gay activity or having AIDS can be executed. The American right is supporting this.52

Some of music video’s power stems from the fact that they are open to so many readings both mainstream and resistant. For pornographer Paul Morris, who offers a queer, posthuman interpretation, “Video Phone” is all about Beyoncé’s chewing gum and Lady Gaga’s genitals.53 He notes Gaga can be imagined as a very white small male/tranny utterly outdone by Beyoncé (the word “tranny” can be used in many contexts, here it is a male-to-female transsexual or transgender person). The camera guys are white; the shirtless/headless men are black (except for at minute 1:46, where the male might be black, Latino, or white). The blue hoods (see figures 9.2a and 9.2b) add a softcore terrorism/torture reference,osexualized as blue/boyhood. The bound boy at minute 1:46 (see figure 9.2b) is wearing a blue male hood, pink/fem jacket, and no shirt. His legs are spread, suggesting strength, confidence, and male genitalia. The halo around him and the blue background suggest blamelessness and anonymous identity. This moment (vulnerable, anonymous masked white male, legs spread, torso bound) refers to the crux of the video. Halfway into the clip, Lady Gaga spreads her/his legs to “prove” to the camera the crucial absence of male genitalia. The lyric “You like what you see?” really means “Do you like what you don’t see?”

The video’s lyrics contain puns and innuendos. “You wanna video me?” parallels “you wanna use me” or “you wanna fuck me” or “you wanna own me.” Since this clip concerns video phones, the “can you handle it?” suggests “can you masturbate to me,” or can you handle the absence.54 The absence in Beyoncé is her vagina (her lack of a penis); for many gay-identified viewers, the absence in Gaga is the effort to remove or deny male genitalia. An intimation that the video considers sexual difference comes early. At the opening, Beyoncé sings “uh-uh,” or “no,” while wearing a bandit mask and leading her male posse (Kill Bill [2003/2004] and Reservoir Dogs references: her “no” takes on lethal force with the soundtrack’s reference to Ennio Morricone’s scores for spaghetti Westerns (see figure 9.1a). After the slow dissolve to Beyoncé’s eyes, we see a nervous camera-headed man straightening his tie who might embody our subject position—we too might feel nervous when Beyoncé directly asks us: “Shorty, what’s your name?”

I’ve claimed that music video is a heterogeneous medium, with many simultaneous, equally engaging events.55 With music video, we must chart our own paths through music and image to find meaning. Music videos also ask us to watch them repeatedly. Lacking in narrative devices and text, and with a shortened form, they rely on reduced materials to convey drama. On the web, with low-resolution and stripped budgets, directors find that their resources for engaging attention may become even more attenuated. In “Video Phone,” Hype Williams foregrounds one of the most minimalist of materials—color—through several means, including raked bodies. Departing from standard industry practice, he does not balance Beyoncé’s skin tone across the video, sometimes going for very deep, rich hues, sometimes a more lightly-complexed, Lena Horne look. These changes often correspond to the song’s rises and falls.56 Beyoncé’s rises sometimes shift to deep brown or black, and in the pinup section they are a grayish blue. Perhaps to foreshadow the turn to a more European American pinup look, in the clip’s Reservoir Dogs spaghetti Western intro, one of the African American men in Beyoncé’s posse is trailed by a strobing halo of curly blonde hair.57 One might judge here that our imaginary for what constitutes American beauty hovers white: we are haunted by a model that is a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

Yet on a second register, Williams argues differently about color. After opening in sexualized, hyper-aggressive reds and blacks, the video turns neutral white and black, and then shifts to deeper blues and pinks. Easter-egg, pastel colors sweep in (particularly with Lady Gaga), which suggest innocence and femininity. In the pinup section, gemstone-like rich emeralds and darker gray turquoises appear. Beyoncé posing as a Bettie Page—like pinup strikes her machine gun up and down, and the shaft is a deep violet purple—a color of tumescence, of sexual excitement. If we keep our attention directed to the hues of her gun, we will eventually be carried along with a densely saturated blue and green that can lead us through surrounding fiery oranges, reds, yellows, and magentas. This blue and green possess special resonance for filmmakers. The two hues share little in common with skin tones so they can be used in matte backgrounds to key out unwanted parts of the frame (such as in the weatherman’s blue-screen). For directors, chromekey blue and green have a special, race-neutral value. Following the video’s changes of color, rather than its representations of people, is a way I like to experience it.

A viewer can also follow the music. The song supports the image’s dense web of signification. The music is unsettling and exotic.58 Are there menacing elements at the periphery? The Morricone opening features a G-Phrygian ostinato (Bb, G, Ab, G), and a mysterious, dark figure that hovers over the song like a cloud. The upper register ostinato’s unsettling quality derives partly because it appears on the offbeats, with its highest pitch on the offbeat of beat two. When Beyoncé states, “Shorty, what’s your name?” we suddenly shift to a happier Mixolydian mode in Eb (a scale with a major 3rd and a flat 7th), yet the Phrygian ostinato still remains. (Beyoncé will sing more of the Mixolydian scale’s pitches at “cologne in the air.”) Both Mixolydian and Phrygian are somewhat exotic. The Mixolydian occasionally turns to the flat side and, at one point (when Lady Gaga asks “Can you handle it?”), both the flat 3rd and the major 3rd occur simultaneously. In the rhythm track the more muffled drum hits sound like an irregular heartbeat (belonging to us or to the bound man?). However exotic, the song
contains redundancies, so small changes seem big. The showbizzy horns where Beyoncé and Lady Gaga dance, and the overdubbed women’s voices completing a major triad (“take a cameo”), register as key events.

A subtle intermedial device also supports the video’s languorous mood. A thread is established through aporias and slight disjunctures. This line begins at the clip’s opening, as one member of Beyoncé’s posse is shadowed by a halo of blonde hair (0:30). Soon (1:49) Beyoncé’s movements are edited to fall off the beat (a rare occurrence for music video’s dancers). The “ahh” (simulating the sound of a arrow released from a bow’s quiver) when Beyoncé sings “Video Phone” (3:55) rings out after reaching its target; here, an arrow pierces a man pinned to a large bull’s eye (3:27), but the sound and image are temporarily displaced. Plastic guns go off, but their fire appears at unpredictable times. Then skin-tone is not balanced for consistency.

Against this broken line, there are circular shapes: Beyoncé’s swirling hips; the circles of light projected on the floor and against the backdrop; and Beyoncé’s and Lady Gaga’s circular pacing from the foreground to the background. The music, too, with its reiterating synthesizer in the upper register creates a sense of circling. The pattern culminates when Beyoncé stands strongly in the foreground and Lady Gaga, with her back to us, runs her hand from the base of her neck up over her head toward her forehead as the vocal line inexorably rises (4:30); the patterns of line and circle coalesce here, but are pushed to the background—this moment seems sexually heightened. Hype Williams has worked with blue-screen for a long time, especially once music video budgets dropped. He may have wanted to run an experiment. What would be the aesthetic requirements for valent, somewhat unresolved, inscrutable imagery? Through this process he may have lit on a new, interesting effect: we’ve not yet seen so many parameters so subtly mismatched to form a structural process and establish a mood.

8) Mirroring the Internet, Eliciting Participation

Successful YouTube clips attempt to embody, depict, and participate in the network. The self-similarity of reiteration makes it possible for videos to sync up with others, creating a more frictionless path through the web’s nodes and links. Each clip should excite, but also elicit an urge to continue on through YouTube. “Haha Baby,” “Charlie Bit My Finger,” “Evolution of Dance,” “Chocolate Rain,” and “The Sneezing Baby Panda” put people in a rhythm as well as in an excitable state that carries them forward. Like a wind-up toy, a web user needs to keep moving through the web to diffuse energy and affect. A second point: viewers and uploaders tend to experience the web in isolation, as monads (each person with a computer peers into and attempts to draw information out of the network). Clips like will.i.am’s “Yes We Can,” “Haha Baby,” “Charlie Bit My Finger” and “The Sneezing Baby Panda” are directed to solo viewers. Last, YouTube clips aim to connect with one another and the world. Viewers and content seem to project a dream of the construction of a total media library. YouTube’s range of clips, with their trailing panoply of video blogs, all spanning the healthcare crisis, religion, and the latest pop concert, are concerned with getting linked up. Parodies on high-ranking clips and how-tos on the most banal topics—like modes of washing kitchen utensils, including more than one spoon (and then remakes of that)—reveal a wish to fill in all the chunks.

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The frontal images and images of infinite regress in “Video Phone” both speak to the viewer and suggest diverging paths that all lead into the network. The dancing camera-headed men underscore the gathering images, which can be relayed out into the web. The clip’s sexual excitement, against its intimations of boredom, may create enough anxiety and drive to keep viewers streaming through at a regular pace, continuing through to other web links. In response to YouTube’s encyclopedic drive, this video’s catalogue of women performers could be an attempt to retain and organize an array of visual imagery. “Video Phone” also reflects the hunger for people and clips that can be seen, heard, discussed, and played out. Is “Video Phone” a comment on the last presidential election and today’s politics? It might reflect American culture’s darker side that a campaign video like “Yes We Can” failed to address—what’s been left out and put aside, in “Video Phone,” seems found and brought near. One might feel ambivalent about the Abu-Ghraiib type of imagery—photographing torture shouldn’t be sexualized or made desirable. Nevertheless, many contemporary films depict torture ([Star Trek [2009], The Bourne Ultimatum [2007], Slumdog Millionaire [2008], Zero Dark Thirty [2012]). It’s part of our history and our psyche. Can these images be put in relation with sexuality, gender, and nationalist movements?

9) Politics, Music Video, and YouTube’s Evolving Discourse

The politics of “Video Phone” may seem objectionable to many. It can make viewers anxious, as the YouTube commentary shows. Consciously or unconsciously, viewers know African American women have fewer choices of image than do European American women. In the past, as Steve Shaviro points out, once they’ve aligned themselves with what’s understood as the raunchy or the tawdry, they may be less able to move to more traditionally valorized subject positions (as Madonna has been able to do somewhat successfully). Beyoncé’s
videos have tended to be sexy but also classy—Beyoncé’s older videos share little with “Video Phone”’s clashing models of good and bad sexuality. A woman may be allowed to take pleasure from bondage, but she shouldn’t then be the around-the-way B-girl or pinup for our boys overseas. She might move up from peep show artist to lounge performer to an even more redeemed state in a field of nearly-pure-whiteness, but she shouldn’t turn it around again by becoming a B-girl and a pinup, and then vulnerably approach orgasm while at the same time performing the role of a bored sex-worker and military trainer. But in order for clips to register on YouTube, such clashes with our cultural categories may become increasingly more common. Maybe such a range of modes is freeing and this is positive. Sexuality, humor, violence, and prissiness are often conflated on YouTube. On the site, repetition with jarring discontinuity holds viewers.61

“Video Phone” reflects the moment it was produced and released. Suddenly freed from the censors in MTV’s Standards and Practices Division, many directors experienced great excitement. Until then, their work had been heavily constrained. MTV limited imagery of drugs, violence, and sex, based on the claims that very young viewers were watching, and parents and advertisers would feel anxious about such content. Now on the web, directors were free! Videos like “Paparazzi,” “Telephone,” and “Video Phone” celebrated the new possibilities, and one way they did so was through the frisson of collaging all kinds of things together. I, who’d been watching music video for 20-plus years, found clips like “Paparazzi” and “Video Phone” shocking. Now, as more time has unfolded, the videos look less radical to me, but at the time, I honestly felt a bit adrift.

Today “Video Phone” makes more sense to me. Its visual and sonic boredom and ennui might be said to reflect an acknowledgment that some part of civil life has been hollowed out, and that the only possibilities that remain are consumerist culture. As Mark Fisher notes, it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.62 This lack of horizon creates a deadened affect. Yet at the same time, one experiences excitement. What beautiful, talented performers! And what engaging music! This is really something to listen to and to watch. Hence the song and video hover between the two affective modes. Now that time has passed, I can adopt new stories with the clip. Perhaps I might take seriously Beyoncé’s opening image as masked leader of a posse, and Gaga and Beyoncé posed against one another, holding their guns upright. Beyoncé could be the new James Bond, an apt heroine for Skyfall, I Spy, or Mission Impossible. Her different stances, postures, and attitudes reflect the changeable roles she’s adopted on her mission. As the video unfolds she takes a moment to relay these to me. The video moves past the more possibly troublesome imagery of bondage to a global bent, focusing on Third World cultures. Perhaps she’s really gone rogue! She’s no longer affiliated with capitalist oppressors like the United Kingdom. She’s part of the resistance. The lyrics are just postures too. I much enjoy watching it this way, though I’m still taken aback with the last images of slashing the eye, as if her other selves were suddenly rent apart. (Gaga’s eyes are bifurcated too, in the overlaid close-ups of her.) And I want to be suspicious about my desire to unify the imagery. Does sewing things up like this remove some of the clip’s radical edge? Am I comfortable with someone who is African American as long as I can place her in any role, including a James Bond heroine? But when things fail to add up, when the subject positions are unknown and various, do I feel more anxiety? How would I feel about “Telephone” if Gaga or Madonna were the heroine? But I do like to take up the masked opening image and imagine Beyoncé as Batman or the Lone Ranger. Gaga can be Tonto or Robin.

We may want to valorize what “Video Phone” does with representations of gender and sexuality. Both Hype Williams and Beyoncé have made a range of work, much of it very progressive.63 As I argue in chapter 8, Beyoncé’s “If I Were a Boy” presents new images of gender and community, and Hype Williams, too, has made cutting-edge work for stars like Missy Elliott and Taral Hicks. As long as makers and viewers critically engage with a variety of media, including those with positive representations, why not grant these artists the space to make a clip like “Video Phone”? Hype Williams rarely works with white artists; this may be the first time he’s worked with an African American and European American female star in the same clip. His engagement with gay culture and aesthetics may suggest a different subject-position than that of other directors. “Video Phone” might be an opportunity to assemble loved icons, gathered from a history of looking at media. Williams’s response to the song is appropriate: alienation, jadedness, and ennui belong to the song proper. Williams can make clips with great tenderness, pathos, humility, or uplift.64

I can’t predict where music video and YouTube will go. Many genres exhibit a cycle of birth and death and relatively short runs. Who would have thought music video, after its recent low points, would come back with such ferocity? Neither am I claiming that this chapter’s description encompasses all of YouTube. The site’s corpus is unfathomable, stretching from documentaries to university lectures, to clips on opera. Nor do all contemporary music videos share these aesthetics. If bandwidth, screen size, and budgets increase, music video may return to a more classical mode.65 Given music video’s uncertain future, it’s a good idea to keep an eye and an ear on Hype Williams and Beyoncé. Few artists have been able to straddle large media shifts. Think of film’s transition from the silent to the talkies, or changes due to television. Hype Williams, more than any other director, has flourished as music videos have moved from cable to YouTube. Beyoncé too has been able to maintain her artistic and star status in a newly digitized, connected age. These are artists to follow.