During the writing of this book, Lady Gaga has emerged as a significant global star. Her debut album, _The Fame_ (2008), spawned six singles and has so far sold more than 12 million copies worldwide. The second of these, ‘Poker Face’, was the best-selling digital track of 2009, selling a total of 9.8 million units globally. A further four tracks have been released from her second album, _The Fame Monster_ (2009), which topped the album chart in the UK and has to date sold more than 4 million copies. Moreover, MTV recently reported that the online viewing figure for her music videos has now exceeded one billion, the first artist whose work has done so. A company specialising in calculating internet video reach, documents that three of Lady Gaga’s videos, _Just Dance_ (2008), _Bad Romance_ (2009) and _Poker Face_ (2009), have been viewed in excess of 250 million times each. Indeed, these videos occupy three of the top twenty positions in their ‘100 Million Views Club’ – the only music video by a female artist to have been watched more times than these is Beyoncé’s _Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)_ , which has attracted an audience of more than 500 million. This situation might go some way towards explaining both the cultural success and critical controversy that attended the release in March 2010 of the video for Lady Gaga’s ‘Telephone’, a collaboration with Beyoncé.

A number of critics have referred to the release of _Telephone_ as an ‘event’. For example, James Montgomery commented on MTV that ‘you will remember where you were when you first saw it’ and Armond White claimed in the _New York Press_ that it is ‘more exciting than any feature-length American
film released so far this year. Moreover, Montgomery hailed the video as a 'medium landmark' and White suggested that its release was her passport to 'the rarest of pop stratospheres, up there with the Madonnas and the, gasp, Michael Jacksons'. Indeed, the film stills posted on Lady Gaga’s website more than a month before the official premiere of the video triggered significant initial speculation about its content and the eighteen-second teaser for the video that was subsequently released on the internet was viewed over 5 million times on YouTube and its associated Vevo channel. Telephone itself has, at the time of writing, now been watched more than 120 million times on YouTube alone. The sheer scale of this cultural event was matched not only by the scale of the critical response to it, but also by the passions it incited in the critics who clamoured to respond to it in the press and on the internet. On the one hand, Bridget Barrett declared that 'Gaga is pushing new boundaries in the art of making music videos' and that Telephone is 'an astonishing achievement'. Even more approving was the critic Saby who, writing on the Feministe blog, claimed that Telephone was 'the most important film of the year' and operates as the latest contribution to Lady Gaga's 'ongoing project of unpacking female sexuality'. On the other hand, the video has been described as 'a sign of cultural decline', the epitome of 'the insanity of the contemporary pop mainstream' which celebrates a heedless refusal to communicate; to mindlessly, heartlessly indulge pop culture. This latter response was perhaps most forcefully expressed by Sandy Rios in an interview with Megyn Kelly on Fox News where she described the video as 'disgusting', 'poison for the minds of our kids and our minds too' which 'should be outlawed, it should be banned'.

In this afterword we consider how several ideas explored in the book may be of assistance in understanding this furore which accompanied the release and reception of Telephone and suggest that such phenomena might jump-start critical interest in music video as an important form of contemporary popular culture. Indeed, if the initial burst of interest in music video was very much wedded to a particular socio-historic moment (the emergence of a putatively new form of television) and a specific critical trend in the arts and humanities (a concern with the theory and culture of postmodernism), then the present moment offers us a new set of circumstances and concerns with which it is both possible and desirable to rethink music video as a particular kind of product that implies a multifarious set of cultural practices and operates as a complex form of cultural representation. In other words, if we grant Jason Middleton and Roger Beebe the point that, notwithstanding its 'initial period of relative productivity', the study of music video has tended to remain 'a marginal subfield within television studies', then it is perhaps time to slough off that incipient critical vocabulary and stop seeing music video as merely a form of television. Indeed, as a few critics have begun to suggest, music video's association with television may well turn out to be a pre-historical anomaly, a prototypical blip in the development of the form. For instance, A. J. Ramirez argues that the internet and sites such as YouTube and Vevo are 'so much more a fitting vehicle for the music video medium than any cable network'. So, it is not just the exponential growth, sheer size and geographical reach of sites such as YouTube that is significant, but the fact that the products themselves are increasingly designed for dissemination on multiple platforms, platforms which both imply and impel different modes of consumption. This notion of difference is important not simply because of the sense of change it signals from models of consumption developed to describe the encounter with television, but because it captures the idea that the same product is now very often consumed, and is consumable, in a variety of ways. Most obviously, the distinction between the video as a promotional tool for the song and the song proper is increasingly giving way. With the inexorable shift to digital music and the cultural impact of Apple's iPod and iTunes on the music market, sound and image are now frequently welded together in the very acts of purchase and consumption. For a small premium, iTunes's customers can now buy the video rather than just the audio track, a shift in retailing acknowledged by the Official Charts Company in January 2007 with their decision to include music video downloads in the UK singles chart. An allied development has seen a number of artists producing videos for album tracks which are never released as singles in the traditional sense of the term. The clear implication of this practice is an assumption that when listening to a piece of music on devices such as iPods, mobile phones and other portable music platforms there will be an image-track to accompany it. Indeed, both the evolution of the iPod and the design of the current generation of such devices to incorporate high-resolution colour screens imply this.

A second difference relates directly to the impact that the internet has had on the distribution and consumption of music video. Not only does it enable the consumer to select which videos they want to watch and when they want to watch them, but they get to choose from pretty much the entire corpus – facilities not available to the viewer of MTV, a figure which dominated so much of the early theorising of music video as a distinctively postmodern form. Moreover, while that MTV viewer had the record, pause and rewind functions of the VCR at their disposal, such editing functions are redoubled for the internet user who can now literally deconstruct a video, fragment it, reassemble it and, in effect, re-author it on run-of-the-mill software. One result of this is that fans are now able to remake and re-edit music videos to their own design and then redistribute and recirculate these new products. YouTube contains innumerable examples of this kind of fan activity which ranges from homage to parody, prequel to sequel, remake to reassemble. Telephone, for instance, has been parodied by Key of Awesome, remade by NoFiy, remixed by thehouseofgagamusk, re-edited by rogaga96, and reassembled using footage from previous
videos by Shawntye. These examples are by no means exceptional. Searching YouTube using the criteria ‘telephone fan video’ returns nearly 3,000 results; ‘telephone parody’ returns over 1,500; ‘telephone remake’ produces over 220; and using ‘telephone sims’ gets you 152 ‘movies’ which use the production capabilities embedded in the computer game The Sims 2 to produce replicas of or homages to the video.

Indeed, Telephone offers a particularly fascinating perspective on the relationship between the internet, digital music culture and contemporary patterns of music video production, distribution and consumption. As the blog critic Sady notes, perhaps the most interesting aspect of the video is precisely ‘how very internet it is’ at the levels of both form and content. She argues that it is ‘not designed to be shown on television... It is ten minutes long, and it has more dialogue than music, and it has the “fuck” word and naked breasts and vaginas and girl-on-girl action and basically everybody gets murdered.’

Moreover, she suggests that the specificities of the computer/internet as a platform have penetrated the form of the video in the sense that ‘you can tell [it] was meant to be turned into nine million animated GIFs, for example, because there are several parts of it that are shot to look like animated GIFs’.

While there is a risk of overstating this impact in any one isolated instance (Telephone is after all a narrative video intercut with aspects of staged-performance), it is nevertheless the case that, on a more general level, this configuration of form, content and platform presents some serious challenges to the traditional models established to conceptualise the way the viewer/user engages with the text and the pleasures derived from doing so. In fact, two of the standard metaphors for describing these processes – the cinematic gaze and the televisual glance – fail to adequately capture the inherent complexity, radical heterogeneity and potential instability of this situation.

Put simply, while the notion of the gaze was conceived to account for a relatively controlled encounter between film text and spectator, and the notion of the glance attempted to incorporate more fluidity into the model in order to describe the domestic encounter with televisual texts, we have since entered a moment where cultural texts of all genres can be owned and stored on the same device, easily manipulated and personalised, and transported either physically or digitally from one location to another. And it is these potentialities – the adaptability and the portability of the digital text generally, and music videos specifically – that might go some way towards explaining the recent re-emergence of both public concern over the consumption of videos and an academic response geared around the attempt to gauge their effects on the individual and society.

In their narrative review of the research undertaken into the influence and effects of music video, Atkin and Abelman unearthed ‘little in the way of longitudinal, externally valid findings that can establish a “smoking gun” with media influences as potent causal agents with human behaviour’. Moreover, they criticise a number of such studies for conflating political rhetoric and methodological rigour. They point out that in trying to select a compelling stimulus, the researchers typically rely on “worst case” stimuli... and present them as “representative” stimuli for a subgenre of music video. More generally, the severe methodological and conceptual shortcomings of the entire tradition of research into media effects have been thoroughly rehearsed elsewhere. Nevertheless, this has not stood in the way of either the UK or US governments commissioning recent reports into the sexualisation of young people. Both reports subsequently argued that music video plays a causal role in this process. In the case of the former, the report’s author, Dr Linda Papadopoulos, deemed there to be sufficient evidence of a damaging link between the content of music videos and the psychological and sexual development of young people to recommend that broadcasters should be compelled to restrict the viewing of videos which contain sexualised imagery.

In the case of the latter, the American Psychological Association found that music videos instigated a process of ‘adulterisation’ of young girls’ sexuality which had consequences for their self-esteem and identity formation, and, by extension, held potential links to the sexual exploitation of them. As a result of its investigations, the APA recommends not only a reduction in the production of such problematic imagery, but also a programme of public education and awareness-raising designed to counteract the putative negative effects of music video.

This ‘effects’ approach has also found a public voice not only through the national press, but also, and perhaps more curiously, through the work of public intellectuals. Written and narrated by Suti Jhally, professor of communication at the University of Massachusetts and founder of America’s Media Education Foundation, Dreamworlds 3 (an educational documentary) argues that music videos present a ‘male dream world’ and suggests that even if their ‘images of women cannot directly cause sexual and violent assault they do rob women of their humanity and create an environment where attacks against them are not treated seriously’. So while it is not necessarily surprising that newspapers such as the Daily Mail should run stories declaring ‘Children at Risk From Pop Charts Porn’ which condemn music videos as soft pornography, it is more worrying that a cultural scholar of Jhally’s standing uses what is essentially teaching material as an opportunity to proselytise on the ‘pornographic imagination’ that he claims defines ‘the system of music video as a whole’. However, perhaps the most surprising thing about this state of affairs is that the one-dimensional and over-generalised analysis that fuels this kind of critical approach, but the lack of a sustained feminist response to it. In other words, if music videos tell ‘a consistent story about masculinity and femininity’ that is ‘based on the degradation and control of women’, and if such ‘images and stories have worked their way into the inner identities of young women
who view their own sexuality through the eyes of the male authors of that culture, then one might have expected some level of reaction. This might have taken the form of a critique of a socio-cultural formation that frames the production of such videos, as well as an analysis of the videos themselves. Alternatively, it might have directed itself towards offering an interrogation of crude effects-based work and providing a more fine-toothed analysis of viewer-text relations. One avenue this latter possibility opens up is the potential identification of videos in which women have worked to resist what Jhally calls ‘the visual language that has already been established as the norm’ and thus extend the range of representational possibilities available to them and the culture more broadly.

It is here, of course, that TELEPHONE is of particular interest. For it offers a deliberately ambiguous and playfully perverse image of femininity that defies normative conceptions of female sexuality. In its absurdist bricklage of lesbian prison films, female revenge fantasy, feminist road movie, and TV cooking shows it activates a number of complex sex-gender discourses and reworks and repositions them in an indeterminate aesthetic space somewhere between high art and trash culture. Indeed, it is this indeterminacy that also characterises a number of the critical responses to the video. On the one hand, some critics have read the video as presenting ‘community between women as a very powerful, dangerous, thrilling space’. Adopting a similarly positive approach, another critic reads the image of a naked Lady Gaga wrapped in crime scene tape as a radical comment on a culture in which women’s bodies are regularly ‘raped, abused, and sexually assaulted’ and are thus often literally the physical scene of a crime. Moreover, ‘Gaga’s body is also a “crime scene” when it comes to crimes of sexual transgression’ in so far as her refusal to fulfil traditional expectations of femininity operates as a ‘crime against heteronormativity’. On the other hand, other critics have seen this very differently and criticised the video for the way it exploits some female sexualities for commercial notoriety. While not entirely dismissive of the video’s fast and loose representation of female sexuality, Sady nevertheless argues that TELEPHONE has ‘given misogynist audiences an eyeful of skinny white women dancing in g-strings’. Ms Wizzle takes a similar view in suggesting that ‘there are a lot of problems with this video, from sexual objectification of women to feeding lesbian fetishism to excessive violence’. The blog critic gudby tfjane is even more scathing in her condemnation of the video in arguing that the fact that Lady Gaga ‘uses trans women and drag queens to eroticize her videos doesn’t defer from the cissexist premise that women = vagina, and trans women are therefore not real women … This is transmisogyny.

This kind of polarised critical response to a video, and more broadly to the work of a female artist, resonates with the critical debate that surrounded the work of Madonna in the late 1980s and early 1990s and which culminated in the publication of The Madonna Connection, Madonnaarama, and Deconstructing Madonna in 1993. For instance, E. Ann Kaplan’s description of the capacity for Madonna’s videos to engage in a ‘blurring of the hitherto sacrosanct boundaries and polarities such as male/female, high art/pop art, film/TV, fiction/reality, private/public’ could have been written to describe TELEPHONE’s own border crossings. Similarly, despite her scathing reading of Lady Gaga as ‘the exhausted end of the sexual revolution’, Camille Paglia’s assertion that Madonna’s JUSTIFY MY LOVE (1990) is ‘a deliciously decadent sarabande of transvestite and sadomasochist personae’ could equally apply to Lady Gaga’s BAD ROMANCE (2009) or ALEJANDRO (2010). Moreover, Cathy Schwichtenberg’s reading of Madonna’s ‘strategies of simulation’ that transform ‘the “truth” of gender into drag’ that is capable of destabilising gender identity and advancing ‘a prodigious sexual plurality’ could just as easily be used to interpret any number of Lady Gaga videos. Indeed, given the seismic impact that Judith Butler’s work has had on the way identity is theorised in the humanities, and in particular the role that the concept of performativity has played in undermining essentialist notions of sex and gender, one might have expected that the emergence of Lady Gaga would have presented a golden opportunity for Butler-inspired scholars. As yet, however, there is little evidence that this opportunity is being seized. In fact, the most obvious difference between the critical responses to Madonna and to Lady Gaga is that the latter has yet to find its way into the academy. This lacuna is especially surprising when viewed in the context of the recent interest in postfeminist culture and the development of a brand of postfeminist theory which has attempted to analyse its implications. For contemporary feminism, and theorists of popular culture more generally, it perhaps matters less if Lady Gaga turns out to be more ‘material girl’ than ‘postfeminist icon’ in the long run than that the debate occasioned by her videos finds a path from the blog to the academy.

Indeed, it is our intention in writing this book to offer a contribution to such a debate.

Notes
13. For example, Beck’s The Information and Beyoncé Knowles’s B’Day are examples of albums by performers, working in very different genres, who have both produced videos for tracks which were never released as stand-alone singles in the traditional sense.
15. Sady, ‘Nothing That Happened This Week’.
16. Sady, ‘Nothing That Happened This Week’.