

## Music Video

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#### “The Picturesque of Sound”

In order to define the forerunners and beginnings of the music video precisely, and to trace its historical development from there, it is important to first recall the two main functions of the genre:

Reproducing as accurately as possible a natural phenomenon—i.e., one occurring in everyday reality—and its simultaneous aesthetic staging, whereby this reproduction should be repeatable at will and, in contrast to such forms as theater, opera, and the musical, should not require narration. Making available the mediated presence of a musical performer in a way that is, like a stage production, primarily addressed to an audience and speaks to it. This aspect explains why videos often have the performer facing the camera.

The specific points of departure for its technical evolution to be mentioned here are, first, the Eidophusikon by the French-born English painter Philip James de Loutherbourg (1740–1812) and Thomas Alva Edison’s Kinetophone of 1891.

De Loutherbourg’s Eidophusikon, first presented in 1781 in London, was an audiovisual miniature theater. Scenes from nature were realistically reproduced on a small stage with the aid of painted and modeled elements that could move, thanks to a clever technology, to the accompaniment of noises and music. The Eidophusikon’s effort to reproduce nature as convincingly as possible (the name is derived from the Greek: *eidōs* meaning “form” or “image” and *phusikos* meaning “original” or “natural”) were judged as extremely successful by contemporaries. De Loutherbourg was praised not only as a genius “who could create a copy of Nature, to be taken for Nature’s self” but also as the inventor of a new audiovisual art: “He introduced a new art—the picturesque of sound.”<sup>1</sup>

This emphasis on close interweaving of image and sound characterizes each of the genres that can be seen as a transitional medium between the Eidophusikon and Edison’s Kinetophone. In 1836 the writer August Lewald described a form of presentation in which the “strikingly similar, moving portrait” of a recently deceased mezzo-soprano was projected while a singer in a hidden location accompanied it.<sup>2</sup>

1 Ephraim Hardcastle (pseudonym of William Henry Pyne), *Wine and Walnuts; or, After Dinner Chit-Chat*, 2 vols., vol. I.1 (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1823), 296.

2 August Lewald, *Album der Boudoirs* (Stuttgart: Literatur-Comtoir, 1838), 42–43.

## The First Recorded Moving Images

This “singing ghost portrait” can be seen as an early forerunner of so-called song slides, which came into fashion in the United States between 1890 and 1915 and were shown during intermissions in vaudeville performances and cinemas. They represented an effort to depict the text and mood of a song visually with the help of a slide show, which included as many as sixteen individual images per song (the refrain was then projected on the screen, so that the audience could sing the song, in the style of today’s karaoke videos). The objective of such presentations was, like the music video later, to advertise the song, the music for which was sold after the performance.

Whereas in the song slides movement could only be suggested by means of clever superimposition tricks, a moving image accompanied by music was the declared goal of Edison’s Kinetophone, a combination film projector and phonograph that he first presented in 1891. It was promoted with a phrase that is highly reminiscent of Lewald’s report cited above: “The illusion is complete and we may see and hear a whole opera as perfectly as if actually present although the actual performance may have taken place years before.”<sup>3</sup> A journalist in Berlin said the purpose of the device was that “anyone sitting in an armchair in his own room could not only hear an entire opera performance telephonically but also see the activities on the stage.”<sup>4</sup> The convincing presence of the sound and image (though not their aesthetic staging) of musical events occurring away in space and time was thus the stated goal of this apparatus, which is described as a forerunner of the television.

The intentions of the Eidophusikon and the Kinetophone—on the one hand, making the presence of the performer available in sound and image and, on the other hand, the aesthetic presentation of events by staging them in a way appropriate to the music—intertwined with and permeated each other to the extent permitted by the available technology.

## First Complex Combinations of Film and Music

Thanks to the Chronophonograph by the French engineer and film pioneer Léon Gaumont, by late 1902 it was possible to create rather complex combinations of image and sound, which approached the lip-synching technique used to produce video clips today. The *phonoscène* for the song “Anna, qu’est-ce tu t’attends; ou, Vas-y, ma poule” (1907), produced by Gaumont and directed by Alice Guy (1873–1968), should thus be considered a direct forerunner to the music video. The action described in the song lyrics (an impatient husband demanding that a woman hurry up with her domestic chores) is interpreted in scenes in which the absurd consequences of male nervousness and hectic rushing are brought home. Long before the first full-length musical film, *The Jazz Singer* by Alan Crosland (USA, 1927), which established the genre of the cinematic musical, the complex possibilities of intertwining action, music, and song text had already been explored. Combining music with dance interludes as a truly film-specific staging was developed in musical films such as *Footlight Parade* (USA, 1933, dir. Lloyd Bacon). In sequences like “By a Waterfall,” Busby

Cinedance

<sup>3</sup> Thomas A. Edison: Patent Caveat (8. Oktober 1888), *The Thomas Edison Papers*, Digital Edition, TAED [PT031AAA] Patent Series-Caveat Files: Case 110: Motion Pictures (1888) [PT031AAA1; TAEM 113]; <http://edison.rutgers.edu/NamesSearch/SingleDoc.php3?DocId=PT031AAA1>.

<sup>4</sup> *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, March 3, 1895, quoted in Martin Loiperdinger, *Film und Schokolade: Stollwercks Geschäft mit lebenden Bildern* (Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1999), 58.

## Abstract Film

Berkeley choreographed the movements of the dances into abstract or floral arrangements that recall Oskar Fischinger's *Studies*. The formal idiom developed in that series of abstract films was influential on the aesthetic of the music video as was the exact synchronization to the rhythms of the music. Moreover, Fischinger often used popular hits as the music. In his *Studie 2* (GER, 1930), set to the song "Vaya Veronica," the final credits included a reference to the recording and its availability in stores, which prefigured the commercial function of the music video. The music video likewise would serve as a place for technical and aesthetic experimentation for things that would later be used successfully in feature films.

## Visual Jukebox 1: Soundies

A certain routine in the production of short music films was introduced in the United States in 1939 in the form of so-called soundies: short, approximately three-minute-long, black-and-white music films in 16-mm format, which could be watched on visual jukeboxes. The soundies usually featured famous jazz musicians and already offered a broad palette of ideas for staging. The acoustic and visual presence of the performers and the aesthetic presentation of the music they played was juxtaposed or intertwined, for example, in the short film made to Count Basie's "Take Me Back, Baby" in 1941. This is particularly evident when the staging of live performance functions as the visual realization of the framing instrumental parts, while the central vocal passages are translated into a visual narrative that interprets the song lyrics. By contrast, the photographer Gjon Mili opted for a direct visual translation of musical structures for his film *Jammin' the Blues*, produced together with Norman Granz, using dance interludes and superimpositions that produced kaleidoscope effects, which were then taken up again in a similar context thirty-one years later in Bruce Gowers' video for "Bohemian Rhapsody" by Queen (1975). One clear homage to these jazz soundies was the prizewinning video directed by Godley & Creme for "Every Breath You Take" by the Police in 1983.

## Visual Jukebox 2: Music Films and Promotional Films for Television

The basic possibilities for visual presentation of music within the framework of a (short) film were exploited almost entirely in the soundies. When the French visual jukeboxes dubbed Scopitones (from "scope a tone") were developed in 1960, color was added as an artistic means. Beginning in the mid-1960s, the Beatles were already using short music films, which required such jukeboxes to show them, to promote their music on television.

Examples include the short films directed by Peter Goldman in 1967 for the double-A-side single featuring "Strawberry Fields Forever" and "Penny Lane." That same year saw a fifty-minute-long music film, *Magical Mystery Tour* (UK, 1967, dir. Bernard Knowles and The Beatles), about a psychedelic bus ride that the Beatles co-directed themselves. The Beatles also played the main roles in a series of feature films such as *A Hard Day's Night* (UK, 1964) and *Help!* (UK, 1965), both directed by Richard Lester, and in the animated film *Yellow Submarine* (UK, 1968), directed by George Dunning.

## Animation

The music films by the Beatles were in part a result of their decision not to organize lavish concert tours and thus represented a way to replace live performances—a concept that was taken up by other musicians in the 1970s (ABBA's "Waterloo," 1974, by Lasse Hallström and Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody," 1975, by Bruce Gowers). These promo films were shown, for example, on music

shows like the extremely popular *Top of the Pops*, which was launched by the BBC in the United Kingdom in 1964.

## MTV and the Music Video Aesthetic

For the inaugural program on MTV in August 1981, the video for the Buggles song "Video Killed the Radio Star," directed by Russell Mulcahy two years earlier, was chosen, since the number of available short music films was modest at the time. The existence of a station specializing in music videos, and commercially successful at it, provided such impetus for the production of the genre that the video director Rudi Dolezal observed in retrospect that during the 1980s "a suitable video was automatically produced for every stupid band."<sup>5</sup>

In the wake of the explosion in the production of music videos, design features began to crystallize that have often been subsumed under the term music video aesthetic. Its characteristics include, among other things, the use of high frequency cuts, compositing and collage techniques, visual effects and graphic elements, and their precise synchronization with the musical beat. The music video became an experimental field at the intersection between technology and art, inspiring numerous filmmakers and visual artists. Moreover, the technical possibilities made it easier to expand the pop cultural strategies of citation, sampling, and appropriation that had been developed in the context of mass media.

Over the course of its history/ies, the music video developed into a highly referential medium that appropriated more and more aesthetic forerunners. Very early on, familiar elements from the musical, advertising, the feature film, the visual arts, and avant-garde film were employed in order to offer the viewer, despite the possible density in a video lasting only the brief duration of the piece of music, an arc of visual tension that was as easy to follow as possible. One example of such use and combination of stylistic means of diverse origin is Bill Konersman's video for "Sign o' the Times" (1987), in which typographic elements and abstract and narrative cinematic forms are interwoven.

## First Crisis and Zeniths: The Perfection of Form

The 1990s are generally regarded as the first crisis period for the music video but also one of its zeniths. On the one hand, the beginning of the decade saw the first economic downturn for the record industry and a certain glut of product, which meant that the previously common widespread generosity in the financing of music videos became much more focused. That led, on the other hand, to music videos with budgets as high as between 2.5 and 7 million dollars (e.g., Mark Romanek's video for Michael Jackson's "Scream" in 1995). In the end, the video developed a high-art form as it increasingly began to be used successfully as an experimental platform for technical innovations that then made their way into the cinema. Examples include digital techniques such as the "frozen moment" that was integrated into the narrative of *The Matrix* in 1999, which had been employed in Michel Gondry's video for "Like a Rolling Stone" (The Rolling Stones, 1995) and taken up again in the videos for Bally Sagoo's "Dil Cheez" (1996) and "Underwater Love" by Smoke City (1997).

<sup>5</sup> Rudi Dolezal, "Musikvideos: Die Avantgarde der 90er Jahre," in *Visueller Sound: Musikvideos zwischen Avantgarde und Populärkultur*, eds. Cecilia Hausheer and Annette Schönholzer (Lucerne: Zyklop, 1994), 168-169, here 169.

Beginning in the 1990s, video directors made increasing references to the conventionalized formats of the mass media and their stylistic means. For example, in his video for "Revolution 909" by Daft Punk (1998), Roman Coppola borrowed narrative forms from documentary films and cooking shows. Other filmmakers, such as Spike Jonze, took their lead from the aesthetic features of film trailers or the opening credits of television series from the 1970s, with their rapid, seemingly heterogeneous series of images that are nonetheless held together by the music, to which Jonze paid a lovingly ironic homage with his 1994 video for "Sabotage" by the Beastie Boys.

This kind of tension-filled construction of high visual density combined with heterogeneous visual subject matter found its equivalent in terms of musical and textural structure in such new musical styles as hip-hop, with its citation and collage techniques. This technique permitted enormously complex interweaving of music, images, and text in videos. The video Dave Meyers directed in 2002 for Missy Elliott's "Work It!" uses its samples and quotations as building blocks to evoke ever new visual associations, which then begin to take on their own lives and ultimately feed back into the levels of music and text that had originally provoked them. This meshing and interaction of the specific video parameters that intersect and dovetail in the music video can open up with extreme concision sometimes extremely ambitious discourses on experiences of personal or supra-individual loss (like 9/11) and issues of race. This marked a zenith of density and complexity that would be followed by a contrary division and diversity of distribution formats.

### The Current Crisis: New Formats and Distribution Channels

Behind the crisis of the music video that is frequently diagnosed today stand two distinct yet related sets of problems. The Internet plays a part in both cases. The record industry experienced another economic downturn in the late 1990s as the result, among other things, of the possibility of downloading music more or less free of charge from the Internet. This in turn led to extreme cuts in the budgets for music videos. Music television also lost its monopoly to the Internet, since it was now possible to play videos immediately rather than waiting—as was previously the case with MTV, for example—until a particular video is shown. In a sense, it represents a return to visual jukeboxes, which also made it possible to choose specific films directly.

#### Games

The change in distribution channels for music also had an effect on music videos and additionally engendered new forms resulting from certain requirements of the media. For example, music videos are increasingly viewed in the form of audiovisual mobile-phone ring tones, so-called machinimas (films produced with the help of game engines), or on the Internet (e.g., the Internet platform YouTube). The circumstances of their reception (e.g., lower image quality) are taken into account by reducing the complexity of the relationship of image, music, and text. The smaller budgets for music videos also means that one finds more aesthetically simplified reproductions or simulated depictions of (live) performances. Consequently, one of the basic functions of the video—as a substitute for a live performance—is given more emphasis, as is the case, for example, with the video Mark Romanek directed in 2005 for "Speed of Sound" by Coldplay.

At the same time, the continuation of a certain innovative vitality of the music video is evident from the fact that creative impulses have sometimes come from its new form of presentation: whereas the director Walter Stern, in his video for "The Prayer" by Bloc Party (2006), made the medium of the video—film—seem to get hot and break out in flames, directors such as Ray Tintori

(in his video for “Evident Utensil” by Chairlift) or Nabil Elderkin (in the video for Kanye West’s “Welcome to the Heartbreak,” also from 2009) deliberately employed the interference and distortion that can result from flawed data transfer via the internet as an aesthetic stylistic feature in so-called datamoshing.

In addition, the availability of digital tools and the spread of internet platforms such as YouTube have led to the updating and recombination of already familiar techniques—for example, when the traditional technique of mashing is applied to videos shot by ordinary users and uploaded to YouTube. Using an idea that Matthew Cullen had employed in his video for “Pork and Beans” by Weezer (2008)—namely, inviting people famous from YouTube to participate in his video—the Israeli musician Kutiman used excerpts from YouTube videos as samples for his *Thru You* project (2009) and mixed them into new audiovisual compositions.

There are also approaches that expand the music video by combining it with software applications. One example of this is Erik Schneider’s *Choose* project (2005-2007), which entailed developing an interactive video structure based on a vvvv patch. Other directors have exploited the possibility of digital image manipulation to open up room to play with innovative combinations of sound and image that also demonstrate the associated increasing virtuality of visual worlds, as Michel Gondry impressively demonstrates in his video for “Star Guitar” by the Chemical Brothers (2002). Starting out with real photographs, a visual object is assigned to each musical event by subsequently editing the visual elements, though this is not evident on first glance.

The aesthetic innovations of the music video by experimenters like Gondry have since been used increasingly in the cinema, not least because many video directors have gone over to the film industry. Their videos influence entire film sequences and establish new forms of narrative. As far back as the Scopitone era, individual directors—Claude Lelouch, for example—applied the experience they acquired there to their film work, while other directors, such as Chris Cunningham, have become established in the art world.



– Stills from Bill Konersman's video for "Sign o' the Times" (1987) by Prince.  
© Warner Bros 1999 (DVD).

### Bill Konersman Prince, "Sign o' the Times" (1987)

Record company: Warner Bros. Records  
Production: Limelight Productions

This video appeals to a form of so-called letterings that is still one of the most popular today, in which parts of or even the entire text of the lyrics is shown in the context of the video. In the present case, it was presumably done to focus the viewers' attention entirely on the content of the lyrics, which lament the deplorable state of affairs of civilization—illness, drugs, youth crime, fear of war, and death—and contradictions overwhelmingly take the form of brief narrative vignettes. Despite the dominance of poverty, people are traveling in space, and dying in the process—the Challenger catastrophe took place just a few months before the song was recorded.

The visual equivalent to the form of the text is a field in the center reserved for the lyrics, which is surrounded by a frame in which pulsing elements reveal the basic beat. The alternating simple geometric forms and strong, clear colors are based on the films of the computer graphics pioneer John Whitney (especially his film *Side Phase Drift* of 1965). By appealing to Whitney's abstract creations, the film is able to resist the universal flood of unambiguous images by depicting animated geometric forms in which several statements are superimposed, as they are in the lyrics. For example, where the latter work with the various meanings of the word "fall" ("But if a night falls and a bomb falls / will anybody see the dawn?"), the crisscrossing structures of the video function, on the one hand, as a neutral scheme of graphic order and, on the other hand, can also be interpreted as crosshairs, in keeping with the text that has just been heard. Likewise, the bright green stripes of color running along the edge of the picture initially recall the movements of the hands of a watch—in a visual correspondence to the title of the song—but also suggest a radar screen.



– Stills from Roman Coppola's video for "Revolution 909" (1998) by Daft Punk  
© Virgin 1999 (DVD).

## Roman Coppola Daft Punk, "Revolution 909" (1998)

Record company: Daft Trax/Virgin

Production: Bandits

In a large American city somewhere, the police are breaking up a rave party attended by young people, and the sounds merge with an instrumental piece by Daft Punk. The curious gaze of one of the girls being filmed falls on a red spot on the shirt of one of the policemen. The video then travels in time to the origin of the spot: a pasta dinner the policeman ate just before going on duty. It does not stop there, however, but continues—in the style of a documentary film or a cooking show reduced to its essentials—to the prehistory of the meal: from the moment a tomato grows and is harvested to the time it is used as an ingredient in a recipe for an Italian sauce (which is also presented in subtitles). The policeman, distracted by the young woman's gaze that appears to have been provoked by this trip through time, unwittingly gives her an opportunity to escape. Thanks to the subtle use of music—from background noise for the framing first and last scenes to the soundtrack for the harvesting and cooking scenes—the video plays with the usual expectations of a (narrative) music video and at the same time communicates, by means of clever changes of perspective and genre, with irony and extreme succinctness something about the protagonists, the worlds from which they come, and the authority they have: the policeman's mother, who gives clear and accurate instructions for the pasta recipe; the policeman, who breaks up the rave party but is then distracted by the spot of sauce on his shirt; and the girl, who thus escapes the clutches of the police.





- Stills from Mark Romanek's video for "Speed of Sound" (2005) by Coldplay.  
© Parlophone/EMI Records / Anonymous Content.

## Mark Romanek Coldplay, "Speed of Sound" (2005)

Record company: Parlophone/EMI

Production: Anonymous Content

At first, the video seems merely to show a performance by the band Coldplay in front of a large venetian blind-like construction in a hall. As the video continues, however, the construction turns out to be a computer-controlled light wall that presents colors and abstract patterns derived from the parameters of the music being heard (volume, pitch, etc.).

This intermodal component of the visualization of the music is taken up on the visual level of the video as well and taken further, so that with the aid of camera movements, zooms, close-ups, and sequences of cuts, the slow increase in the dynamics and volume of the music (from a quiet, slow, and dark beginning toward a loud, fast, and radiant finale) is transferred optically to the light wall and realized cinematically as well. At the same time, this offers a visible pendant to the "speed of sound" mentioned in the song lyrics; similarly, other aspects of the text are interpreted in specific gestures by the musicians, by the forms and colors of the light wall, and by the camera work: when Chris Martin sings the words, "Look up, I look up at night / Planets are moving at the speed of light," for example, he looks upward, while a light rain of white light, resembling a cloud of shooting stars, begins to fall down the wall. This kind of synchronization of light, colors, and movements with the music establishes general analogies of color and sound (dark, rather static moments are accompanied by quiet, soft music, whereas harsh light, intense colors, and powerful movements seem to correspond visually to loud, dynamic sounds). The director, Mark Romanek, thus gives the viewers an opportunity to see the sounds, but at the same time avoids the temptation to use specific images to illustrate in a trivial way very poetic lyrics that cannot easily be interpreted unambiguously.



- Stills from Michel and Olivier Gondry's video for "StarGuitar" (2001) by Chemical Brothers.  
© EMI Electrola 2003 (DVD).



– Stills from Michel and Olivier Gondry's video for "StarGuitar" (2001) by Chemical Brothers.  
© EMI Electrola 2003 (DVD).

### Michel and Olivier Gondry Chemical Brothers, "Star Guitar" (2001)

Record company: Virgin/Astralwerks

Production: Partizan Entertainment

Using motifs probably inspired by the throbbing basic pulse of the piece and by the music accompanying travel films and train rides, the video presents an experience of a landscape that perfectly suits the music. The world endlessly passing by the window of the train compartment is (thanks to digital technology) perfectly harmonized with the music in terms of its elements, its structure, its atmosphere, and its speed—that is, rhythmic elements, structures of repetition, and interruptions of the beat correspond to equivalents on the visual level. For example, the overlapping images reflected in the window of the train car and the exterior rushing past correspond on the musical level to merging sounds, and people are clearly seen only in an intermediate part when human voices enter singing the song's only words ("You should see what I see / You should take what I take"). Because these phrases are sung to long-held notes, and the basic beat otherwise heard everywhere is missing from this passage, it results in a subjective impression that the music is slowing down. This is taken up and amplified on the visual level by the train throttling back its speed as it passes through a station. At the same time, the travelers waiting on the track seem to pass in slow motion. In keeping with the lyrics, this can be understood as a reference to taking drugs, which is perhaps intended to account for the perfect harmony of the "musical landscape" shown with the music.