Portable Music Videos? Music Video Aesthetics for Handheld Devices

Des clips portables ? L'esthétique des clips musicaux sur les appareils mobiles

Henry Keazor

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/volume/5594>

DOI: 10.4000/volume.5594

ISSN: 1950-568X

Publisher

Association Mélanie Seteun

Printed version

Date of publication: 26 April 2018

Number of pages: 201-210

ISBN: 978-2-913169-44-9

ISSN: 1634-5495

Electronic reference

Henry Keazor, "Portable Music Videos? Music Video Aesthetics for Handheld Devices", *Volume !* [Online], 14 : 2 | 2018, Online since 01 January 2021, connection on 14 November 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/volume/5594> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/volume.5594>

Tribune

Portable Music Videos? Music Video Aesthetics for Handheld Devices

By Henry Keazor (Heidelberg University)

14
2

Abstract: This paper presents the approach and the findings of a three-year-research project, which examined the way music videos (would) have to change if they are getting increasingly consumed on handheld devices. Since these come along with very specific conditions regarding size (see the smaller screens of mobile phones and tablet computers as opposed to bigger desk- or laptop displays) and sound, music videos in their aesthetics concerning visual as well as acoustic editing have to adapt accordingly. Following the saying by Jean-Luc Godard that “a technical innovation is worthless if there is no corresponding formal innovation, in whose melting pot it forges what one calls ‘style’,” the project not only examined music videos, but it also analysed the reception of endeavours such as Björk’s app-album *Biophilia* (2011).

Keywords: music video / smartphone / application / reception

Résumé : Cette tribune se propose d’examiner l’approche et les résultats d’un projet de recherche de trois ans qui considère les transformations des clips musicaux à l’heure de leur consommation croissante sur des dispositifs mobiles.

Dans la mesure où ceux-ci s’accompagnent de conditions spécifiques concernant la taille des écrans (ceux des téléphones et des tablettes étant plus réduits que ceux des ordinateurs de bureau) et le son, les clips doivent s’adapter, tant du point de vue de leur esthétique visuelle que de leurs principes de montage acoustique. En suivant le propos de Jean-Luc Godard selon lequel « une innovation technique est sans valeur si elle ne s’accompagne pas d’une innovation formelle correspondante, leur association forgeant ce que l’on appelle le “style” », ce projet ne se contente pas d’examiner des clips musicaux, mais analyse aussi la réception de projets tels que l’app-album de Björk *Biophilia* (2011).

Mots-clés : clip musical / smartphone / application / réception

“[...] a technical innovation is worthless if there is no corresponding formal innovation in whose melting pot it coins what one calls ‘style’”
Jean-Luc Godard¹

The project I want to present in this article started in 2011.² It was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), and in it a cultural and media scientist (Thorsten Wübbena from the university of Frankfurt), an information scientist (Professor Hans Giessen from the Saarland University) and me, as an art historian, collaborated.³

The project was first designed in a way that it addressed the then emerging

¹ Quoted after Theweleit Klaus (2003), *Deutschlandfilme. Filmdenken & Gewalt*. Godard. *Hitchcock*. Pasolini, Berlin: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 65.

² See also the project website www.portablemvs.net/ [29 March 2017].

³ http://www.iek.uni-hd.de/forschung/portablemvs/team_de.html [29 March 2017].

trend of record companies and musicians to increasingly step up to discovering and exploring the possibilities of the so-called “handhelds,” that is mobile devices such as mobile phones, smartphones and tablet computers as new means to distribute audio visual material, that is: video clips, in order to advertise music. YouTube videos could then already be played on such devices, and in this phase the industry had also begun to launch so-called “video-ringtones,” that is audio visual ringing signals for mobile phones and smartphones, which could be downloaded and installed. Very often these ringtones consisted of a chorus, taken from a then popular song, illustrated by snippets from a corresponding or an especially made video.

This seemed to repeat a development that had already been observed with the advent of television: films, intended to be screened on a bigger screen (such as in cinemas), but which were then viewed on a much smaller screen (such as for example a TV screen), suffered a loss of effect and impact on the viewer.⁴ This effect of a close relationship between their formal and aesthetic design on the one and their display size and format on the other hand had been discovered for example when films, originally shot in cinemascope, were then shown on television: the loss of monumentality as well as the fact that many of the details that enriched and enhanced the effect of the wide-screen image on the viewer could only be perceived badly or not at all on the smaller television screen

did lead to the situation that TV-audience experienced the movies as boring.

This also reveals a connection not just between the format in which a film is shown and the composition of its individual images (rich in details or rather not), but also concerning the editing speed. If in test screenings of wide-screen films the sequences did follow too densely and fast one after another, the cinema-audience did not have enough time to scan and explore visually the entirety of the picture, so that a feeling of frustration arose since the viewers had the impression that they were not able to keep up with the speed of the film.

However, the here-from resulting slower editing pace could turn out to be too slow on the TV screen, since here the picture can be scanned and grasped in a much more quicker way and details are sometimes not noticed anyway. Nevertheless, from here one still can not deduce in general way that that every film, to be shown on a smaller format, should, in principle, have a higher editing speed in order not to be boring for the audience. This is because the way the images of a film are conceived and composed has to take into account also the size in which it will be displayed, that is: if the film includes details which are supposed to be recognized and deciphered by a TV audience, not only the editing speed has to take this into account and has to be hence measured accordingly, but also close-ups of important details should be included in order to give the audience the chance to observe and recognize the details which might be important and necessary for the understanding of the narration or the meaning of a film,

It thus becomes evident that in film there is a close connection between the

parameters of the “size” (or the “format”), the “composition” (that is the “editing”) of the images and the ‘speed’ with which they are edited. Exactly these parameters do also apply to the situation of music videos, watched on handheld displays, since from the 1990s on a type of music video, shot for television, had been developed where the meaning and narrative was mediated via sometimes highly refined references, working with details such as e.g. graphic characters (letters) and/or symbols (ill. 1).⁵

On the smaller display of a handheld such references would be lost which would either mean that the videos would be no

Illustrations 1a & 1b: music video by Michel Gondry for Björk's song “Bachelorette” from 1997: confrontation between the same scene as seen on a big (left) and on a small screen (right)

longer understood or that this form of music clips would lose its significance in the future.

This indicated a scenario in which the music industry would either have to begin to produce music videos that would work equally on the larger format of the TV screen (and especially on the then also upcoming large flat TV screens) as well as parallelly on the handheld display, or to even produce two individual versions of the same video where the scenes unsuitable for the respective target medium would be replaced by correspondingly adjusted sequences.

Given that we observed this in 2011, when all this was still new and the outcome as well as the directions to be taken by the music industry were still unclear,⁶ the project represents one of the rare moments in the humanities, where the research is almost a step ahead of the facts, because when we spoke with the representatives of the music industry, directors and producers after the

5 See for example a music video by Michel Gondry for Björk's song “Bachelorette” from 1997 where it is necessary for the understanding of the narration of the clip to be able to read the first sentences which magically appear in the book *Bachelorette* has just dug up and found (ill. 1a), since they correspond exactly to the wording of her off-screen-narration of the depicted events. The viewer thus begins to understand that from then on the narrated events and the narration of the book are closely linked in a way, which suggests an unusual hierarchy: while narrating her actions in the past, the book actually prescribes *Bachelorette* what she will have to do. Accordingly, *Bachelorette*'s story enters a crisis the moment she departs from the prescribed storyline. If the words can not be read properly at the beginning of the story because the viewing screen is too small (ill. 1b), the viewer will have difficulties to understand all these implications of the “*Bachelorette*”-video. See for this also Keazor Henry & Wübbena Thorsten (2011), “*Video thrills the Radio Star*”: *Musikvideos: Geschichte, Themen, Analysen*, Bielefeld, transcript, 94-99. For the wider context see also: Kern Angela (2012), “Wie wirkt ein kleines Bild—Betrachtung aus der Sicht der Medienproduktion”, in Giessen Hans, Keazor Henry & Wübbena Thorsten (eds.), *Zur ästhetischen Umsetzung von Musikvideos im Kontext von Handhelds*, Heidelberg: artdok, 121-137, online: <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2012/1867/> (entire volume) resp. <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2012/2022/> (article by Kern) [29 March 2017].

6 At the beginning of the project music video directors and producers we contacted voiced even their conviction that in their view handheld devices would not play any major role in the future.

beginning of the project, we understood that that they had not yet clearly realized the consequences of the format difference, coming with the increasing use of handhelds, but in the course of events they begun to agree with our point of view.

We thus had a situation as envisioned as an ideal by the media theorist, critic and artist Lev Manovich in his article “Cinema as a Cultural Interface” from 1998: Based on the realization that, from the end of the 19th century and onwards through the twentieth century, the chance had been missed to consciously accompany the development of film as a new technique from its beginnings via the humanities and sociological sciences in a documenting and analytical way, Manovich therefore urges that we should do this in the future with the advent of other new media so that we don’t—as in the case of film—have to rely on retrospective hypotheses and speculations, but find ourselves able to systematically present “a record and a theory” of the just occurring.⁷

Quite in this sense, and also in order to bring ourselves up to date with the theoretical, methodological and practical aspects, we organized an international workshop at the Saarland University in October 2011 and invited media theorists as well as practitioners.⁸ What we learned during this workshop was then effectuated in a practical way a year later in the context of a cooperation with the Mediadesign Hochschule (MDH) in Berlin

with which we organized a three-day seminar. In close collaboration with professors from the high school and together with the Swiss film, music video director and producer Chris Niemeyer from the company Plan B Film,⁹ we arranged in April 2012 an event, which involved the students of the MDH. We did interviews with them as well as with their teachers at the beginning and then again at the end of the seminar in order to see whether and how they (as “digital natives” and “early adopters”) deal with the possible changes, coming in theory and practice during their studies, as well as in everyday life with their use of smartphones as media devices.¹⁰

We then gave them the assignment to conceive and realise in working groups and with the professional support of Chris Niemeyer different versions of a music video, which all take into account the various issues, which are crucial for a consumption of videos on traditional large screens as well as on smartphone displays. As mentioned before the hereby crucial criteria were to the before discussed parameters such as editing speed and image composition (details).¹¹

At the same time, we began a series of interviews with the people responsible creatively for a music video, made by director

7 Manovich Lev (1988), “Cinema as a Cultural Interface,” W3LAB, online: <http://gsa.rutgers.edu/maldoror/techne/w3lab-entry.html> [29 March 2017].

8 For the publication of the proceedings, see here note 6.

9 <http://www.planbfilm.ch> [29 March 2017].

10 The results of these interviews as well of those others, mentioned in this paper, will be published together with the results of the survey of probands, mentioned below, in the documentation of the entire project on artdok (<http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/>) towards the middle of 2018.

11 The results, using the (public domain) song “Black Mask” by the Swiss rock group “The Fox,” were uploaded at the MDH’s YouTube-channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/mdhdfd1010> [29 March 2017].

Illustrations 2a & 2b: music video for the song “Who’s that Chick?” by David Guetta featuring Rihanna (2011): the same scene on the left in the “Day”-, on the right in the “Night”-version

14
2

Jonas Åkerlund in 2011 for the song “Who’s that Chick?” by David Guetta featuring Rihanna. Here, actually two individual versions (a “Day” and a “Night” version) had been produced which could be accessed online via a code, printed on a package with snacks for advertising purposes and fed into a computer via its camera lens.¹² The video was thus obviously only conceived for on-line viewing via a computer, and it seemed that aesthetically one version (the “Night Version” due to its lacking contrasts and medium long shots: ill. 2b) could be best followed on a big screen while the other version (the “Day Version”) aimed at being presented also on a smaller display (because of its more stark

contrasts and close-ups: ill. 2a).¹³ However, during the interviews¹⁴ we had to realize how far ahead we had been thinking since the creative directors of the production company (Hi-ReS!, London), responsible for the video, admitted that at the time of the conception as well as the production of the video they had not even thought of handhelds and that they hence had missed an enormous chance, even for practical reasons: on home computers or laptops for which the clip was designed for, the use of the code, allowing to

¹³ Both versions of the video can be seen under <http://www.promonews.tv/videos/2011/03/09/david-guetta-and-rihannas-whos-chick-jonas-%C3%A5kerlund> [29 March 2017]; under <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Ylgfbn74qk> they are edited in a way that they can be compared by following them simultaneously side by side [29 March 2017].

¹² For the background of the advertising strategy, see the “Rihanna Doritos Late Night Case Study” by the American food company Frito-Lay from 2011: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikpAWgzpLgE> [29 March 2017].

¹⁴ Interview done with director Florian Schmitt on November 16, 2012 at Hi-ReS! (<http://hi-res.net/>) in London. See also here note 10.

switch between the two versions, did lead to an only reduced perception because of the position of the camera. Such computer cameras are mostly placed in the immediate vicinity of the screen so that the display gets covered up and partially blocked by the package when the code, printed on it, is scanned, which means that parts of the then alternating versions of the video cannot be seen at all. Cameras on handhelds are, however, placed on the backside of the device, so that one could have managed a less hampering and complicated switching between the two versions if the videos would have been conceived for mobile-use.

At the same time, we began to understand how important “apps” would become for our project: in 2011 Björk had published her latest album *Biophilia* as an app, where each song was accompanied by an audio-visual app, created by the Los Angeles based digital artist Scott Snibbe.¹⁵ As the artist explains in a tutorial for the “Crystalline”-app,¹⁶ “each app has a natural, a musical and an interactive element,”¹⁷ whereby the musical element is the structure of Björk’s song, the natural element is visually represented by a series of crystal tunnels through which the user—via the interactive element of the motor sensors of the technical devices, responding to their tilting and spinning—can steer a flying avatar with the task to gather and collect as many crystals as possible (ill. 3).

Illustration 3: audio-visual app, created by the Los Angeles based digital artist Scott Snibbe for Björk’s latest album *Biophilia*

In doing so, the user makes choices which parts of the songs to enter which allows him or her to “actually recombine the song into tens of thousands of different versions by stringing together its sections in different order,”¹⁸ thus “earning” via the game individual variations of the song.

The album caused some sensation since it was added, as the first downloadable app in a museum collection, in June 2014 to the permanent collection of the New York Museum of Modern Art.¹⁹ But Björk, nevertheless, still had conventional music videos produced for each individual song of the album (for example by Michel Gondry for the song

15 <https://www.snibbe.com/>, here especially <https://www.snibbe.com/apps#/biophilia/> [29 March 2017].

16 See Snibbe, Scott (2011), *björk: biophilia: crystalline app tutorial*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzfxNssNns> [29 March 2017].

18 Snibbe (2011), 1:17-1:23.

19 See the post of the Senior Curator, Department of Architecture and Design at the MOMA, Antonelli, Paola, “Biophilia, the First App in MoMA’s Collection” from June 11, 2014 under https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2014/06/11/biophilia-the-first-app-in-momas-collection/ [March 2017].

“Crystalline”),²⁰ so that our prediction of a future music industry producing two versions of music videos, one for conventional large-and one for handheld displays, had in some way come true.

In 2013, at the Institute for European Art History of Heidelberg University, we started a series of surveys with test persons who had volunteered to first view music videos on various devices and to the answer a questionnaire as well as respond in an ensuing oral interview. The participants first saw a music video (the “Black Mask”-video, shot by the students of the MDH, as mentioned above) first on the computer (laptop), then on a smartphone and then an iPad (a normal seized one as well as an iPad mini). In a second running, they were shown the music video and the app to Björk’s song “Crystalline” from her album *Biophilia*.

Finally, they saw the app to the song “The Time (Dirty Bit)” by the Black Eyed Peas from 2011, both on the smartphone and on the iPad, since these are the devices targeted by the interactive and immersive app, which works with the movement sensor of a tablet computer or a smartphone (ill. 4).²¹

The results showed that, as far as media usage is concerned, longer audio-visual formats were then still predominantly viewed on TV, more rarely on computers where people tend to watch rather shorter films.

The smartphone was then used only rarely and rather for short clips. The use of the iPad was not yet an important factor.²²

The limited use of the smartphone in longer moving picture productions can be explained by the fact that—as the first part of the investigation clearly showed—details are more likely to be missed. Although the display of the current smartphones is, in contrast to previous mobile phone generations, quite large so that at least details relevant to the action are perceived, the amount of test persons who overlooked important aspects of the content (and this in a laboratory situation, without any other distractions) is remarkable. Further consequences regarding the size, the contrasts and the editing speed were also found to be decisive in the course of the investigation.

There were very different assessments in the examination of Björk’s music video and app for “Crystalline”: interestingly, the participants discerned between the song itself and its audio-visual interpretations in the music video and app. Around three quarters of the respondents did not like the song, so that first possible “radiation effects” were to be feared (meaning that if they did not like the song, they would also dislike the music video respectively the app). However, the test persons differentiated their assessments very clearly: Although most probands disliked the music video, the general rejection was weaker than the reaction concerning the

20 See the video uploaded by a sub channel of Björk’s official website <http://www.bjork.com>, “BjorkTV” on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvaEmPQnbWk> [29 March 2017].

21 See the information on the project, gathered by the “Black Eyed Peas”-member and mastermind of the app will.i.am on his tumblr: <https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/will.i.apps> [29 March 2017].

22 See for the following the reference given here in note 10 and Giessen Hans W., “Björks *Crystalline* aus Sicht der Rezipienten. Ergebnisse einer qualitativen Befragung zur Mediennutzung und –bewertung,” in Henry Keazor (ed.), *Kunstgeschichte, Musikvideo und Bildwissenschaften. Eine Einführung*, Berlin: Reimer, 2018 (in print).

musical title alone; some test persons even praised the music video, although they did not like the music.

The response concerning the app was even more pronounced: around two-thirds of the respondents praised the app, only about a third rejected it. They were in particular fascinated by the game which led them to rate the app better than the song or the video (this shows how much they were able to differentiate between the song and the video resp. the app: they liked the music video and the app in particular *despite* the song or—in the case of the app—even because it distracted from song). One can thus say that at least in this case the app did not really fulfil its purpose of raising the awareness for the music: the app was instead probably rather perceived as an independent work of art. However, this also meant that the actual function of the app as making the users sensitive for the music (as it had been repeatedly emphasized by Björk, Snibbe and the press)²³ was thus not achieved, or even if it not outright failed, it appeared at least as heavily undermined: none of our probands for example realized that there were differences between the versions they had “played” on the iPad and the version accompanied by Gondry’s music video.

23 See for example Schiesel Seth (2011), “Playing the New Bjork Album, and Playing Along, With Apps,” *The New York Times*, 24 October, online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/25/arts/video-games/bjorks-biophilia-an-album-as-game.html> [29 March 2017]. Björk even intended a pedagogic usage of her apps in the context of musical education – see for example the video documentation of the *Biophilia Educational Program*, uploaded by Björk’s official website under <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=659qIBbOVI8&feature=youtu.be> [29 March 2017].

The test persons voiced themselves similarly differentiated concerning the song “The Time (Dirty Bit)” by the Black Eyed Peas. The song was rejected by all of them, but the app, among other things, was also praised especially because it distracted from the song. The images for the app had been captured with a 360-degree camera and it enables the user, thanks to the moving sensor of the tablet computer, to freely “move” the viewer’s gaze within this filmed space (ill. 4). Two-thirds of the test persons did find this idea new and fascinating. However, its realization, which after an introduction sequence, judged as interesting, then only showed dancing people in a disco, was felt as boring. The rating after the use on the smartphone was even more positive than after the use on the iPad. Since the app was watched twice, first on the iPad and then on the smartphone directly after another, one could have expected fatigue effects because of the double experience of always the same content. However, it seems that the idea of moving in a virtual space can be carried out more easily with the smartphone. It was remarked in a critical way that

VOLUME!

Illustration 4: advertisement for “The Time (Dirty Bit)” by the Black Eyed Peas

especially in the scenes with the dancing people details were difficult to recognize when the device was moved. When using the big iPad, the intended effects of an activation of the test-persons to likewise move and probably even dance along did not work because the device was perceived as too large and bulky, as confirmed by a majority (with a single exception). For this reason, the decision was made to use an iPad mini in the second wave of surveys. However, the use and the evaluation of the test persons here was, despite the smaller device, hardly different from those of the test persons from the first survey.

The assumptions made at the beginning of the project, that the format change from the larger display of the TV screen to that of the smartphone has consequences for the reception of the audio-visual content consumed there, was thus confirmed both by the usage behaviour as described in the interviews with the test persons as well as by their reactions to the various devices during the tests.

Contrary to the general assumption that an audio-visual format is accepted or rejected in its entirety, the users actually responded in a very differentiated way concerning the song, as the base for an audio visual format, and its visual component.

As already stated, Björk's "Crystalline"-app was not experienced as being suitable as a support for the music with regard to a media interaction. On the contrary, the app is appreciated *despite* the song or even outright because it *distracts* from song. It thus does not seem to qualify as a media-adequate support for the song, in contrast to the music video, produced by Gondry.

This, in principle and beyond the individual making of the specific examples used here, has to do with the interactive nature of the app, from which the music video, which induces a rather passive reception, differs. Where there are (in the ideal case) the different media products in their effect, in the case of the app there is the danger that the one media product overlays the other, so that the original product (the song) loses in importance.