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Music Video in its Contexts: 30 Years Later

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Will Straw

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Music Video in its Contexts: 30 Years Later

Le clip vidéo et ses contextes : 30 ans plus tard

Will Straw

- 1 THIRTY YEARS AFTER I wrote the article reproduced elsewhere in this issue of Volume, the videoclip is an elusive entity. In the present moment it has become, it would seem, both ubiquitous and minor. Through the videoclip, YouTube has become the largest disseminator of music in the world, but this has diminished rather than magnified the clip's status as cultural form. The abundance of clips on Youtube seems a sign of little more than that platform's uncontrolled voraciousness and role as dumping ground for all kinds of minor cultural forms (from old *films de série B* to computer repair instruction videos.) Here, the artistically ambitious videoclip finds itself lost amidst the static photographs, images of spinning vinyl records or footage of ephemeral live performances that accompany so much of the music that Youtube makes available. Most of the time, one looks for videoclips on Youtube in order to hear a song or initiate a playlist (Manghani, 2017); the clip itself has become little more than the sheathing in which a song is enclosed.
- 2 Outside of Youtube, the videoclip has come to play a minor role in scenarios for the future development (and revival) of the music industries. Excitement in these industries, over the last decade, has centred on the rise of audio streaming services, like Spotify, Tidal or Apple Music, from which the videoclip has been banished or on which (as with Tidal) it functions as little more than a supplementary feature. Indeed, as Manghani suggests, the informational heaviness of the videoclip (as data and

cultural expression) may be a barrier to its use in the transient passage of music across devices so central to the logic of streaming services (2017: 13).

- 3 Most dramatically, the videoclip has failed to acquire a significant presence on the social media platforms – Facebook, Instagram and Twitter – which are at the centre of our media landscapes. Algorithms able to identify the music contained in posted clips remain elusive, and the establishment of remuneration systems for holders of musical copyright is far from complete (Stack, 2017). Even if these problems are resolved, however, it is entirely possible that the traditional videoclip, produced by artists to represent and promote their music, will be displaced by user-generated videos that borrow the music of others as their sonic backdrops. This is the basis of the currently ascendant social media platform *musical.ly* (Russell, 2016).
- 4 If the videoclip has become an ever more minor cultural form, the scope of scholarly writing about it has expanded, becoming increasingly interdisciplinary and plural in its orientations. The articles gathered in this issue of *Volume* testify to the rich variety of approaches to the videoclip at the present moment. Many of the anxieties that marked the first wave of writing on videoclips have largely disappeared. Where once the adornment of music by image was seen to threaten music's capacity to remain authentic, the bases of cultural authenticity have been successfully redefined over the last three decades. The "truth" of popular music is now a function of its capacity to mobilize the markers of racialized, gendered or sexualized identities. Music's authenticity is now judged in large measure by its capacity to express (or challenge) these identities, and the realm of the visual offers a privileged site in which these operations may be carried out. This is not, as some might suggest, because music has lost its struggle with the image, but because the authenticity of music now lies less in its distance from commodification than in its proximity to broader practices of identitarian performance.

The videoclip as form

- 5 In the articles assembled in this issue of *Volume*, the question of the textual character of the videoclip invites a variety of responses. In the first wave of writing on the videoclip, its form was often seen as caught between those of cinema and television. The clip was believed to intensify (in its compressed form) the mechanisms of fascination and seduction deemed typical of cinema in both its classical and contemporary *auteurist* versions. At the same time, in the non-stop streams of clips unfolding on networks like MTV, one found the most fully realized confirmation of Raymond Williams's definition of television as "flow" (Williams, 1975: 86). In 2018, the clip no longer sits so comfortably between these two media forms. The cinema of fiction is now torn between the spectacular blockbuster and the low-budget made-for-Netflix-style film of limited ambition. The former far exceeds the videoclip in its staging of choreographed performance, and reinforces a present-day sense of the clip as a minor form. The latter, much of the time, is too bound to an everyday naturalism to serve as inspiration for the audiovisual presentation of music. On television, the constant flow between different genres of programming has given way to a seriality in which viewers spend hours within worlds marked by narrative and stylistic continuity. In this new context, the videoclip seems disagreeably brief and incomplete. In any event, in 2018, the intermediality of the videoclip is less and less a function of its

relationships to cinema and television. It is now a particular arrangement of elements within a wide variety of long and short forms, and within a broader explosion of (audio) visual culture.

- 6 If the intermedial relationship of clip to television or cinema has been weakened, how, then, might we speak of it in formal terms? Warren Buckland, writing elsewhere in this issue on the clips made by Michel Gondry, sees the videoclip as constructing what, following David Herman, he calls “storyworlds”. These are narrative spaces characterized by internal principles which are not necessarily (or even usually) those of the world we inhabit. If such “storyworlds” are a property of all fictional texts, the limited duration of videoclips like those of Condry allows these principles to become self-imposed constraints not unlike the rules of a game. One example of the adoption of such constraints, offered by Buckland, is the way in which Condry’s clip for “Come Into My World” is organized as a series of duplications. If there is a formal specificity to the videoclip, then, it may lie in what Gaudin elsewhere has called its status as “forme brève” (Gaudin, 2013: 169): a form that is not simply an abbreviated version of cinema, or even of the televisual program, but a conceptual form engaged in the playing out, over a few minutes, of a single aesthetic idea.
- 7 In Gaudin’s contribution to this issue of *Volume*, the clip is less the elaboration of a space or “world” than the setting in place of an energetic process. In this process, music dominates. As Gaudin suggests, music in the videoclip is heard as the source of images and their movement, never as their accompaniment. Videoclips produce a constantly fluctuating set of relationships between music and image, but the resulting form is not one in which either of these expressive forms somehow “represents” the other. Rather we must see the videoclip as something entirely distinctive, « un art pop à la fois ludique et critique, d’une forme-flux façonnée par ses propres modalités d’écoulement ». If there are affinities between the videoclip and other artistic forms, the closest, perhaps, are between the clip and various works of contemporary art engaged in the production of fluctuating relationships between meaning and sensation.
- 8 The relationship of sense to sensation is further explored in the semio-pragmatic analysis of clips and viewer comments offered by Julien Péquiot, whose methodology includes the analysis of commentaries on videoclips posted online. Sometimes we are led to an analysis of the “use” of videoclips, Péquiot suggests, by our enduring inability to define them in ontological or formal terms. A close attention to the judgements made by those commenting on clips reveals the intense investment of these spectators in evaluating the authenticity and moral acceptability of musical artists. This is particularly the case for the clips Péquiot analyses, which weave together images both archival and contemporary in order to produce particular combinations of aesthetic and political sensation. The judgements of viewers, he suggests, do not usually treat the clip as an argumentative discourse. Rather, they are more attentive to the power of the materials assembled and the validity of the choices underlying this assemblage. There is no enunciator to be judged, but rather the “monstration” of the clip itself, which does not explain but simply shows.

Where is the videoclip?

- 9 In the discipline of film studies, it is sometimes said, the ontological (and Bazinian) question “What is cinema?” has been partially dislodged, in recent years, by the

question “Where is cinema?” (Frodon 2011: 82-83). In this shift, the cinema is studied in its dispersions -- across media, platforms, devices, institutions -- rather than in terms of any defining formal or technological essence. Many of the contributions to this issue of *Volume* enact a similar shift in the study of the videoclip, following its dispersion into cultures outside those of the geographical North and West, and tracking the passage of the clip across media platforms. The videoclip, then, is set in relation to multiple overlapping systems of circulation: those which carry the clip across platforms and contexts, and others through which the clip itself becomes a meeting place for circulating traditions of performance, expression and visibility whose origins lie outside it.

- 10 Orillard’s revisiting of the history of the Scopitone, a phenomenon commonly invoked unproblematically as the “ancestor” of the videoclip, is in part about these circulatory systems. Scopitone films themselves, in the 1960s, moved through an visual culture that included television, magazines, films, record covers and other media. In these media, images of musical performers were either combined with music or detached from it in order to circulate autonomously. The disinterest of record companies and television broadcasters in the Scopitone as vehicle of promotion or entertainment seems to us now like a curious negligence. As Orillard shows, this had much to do with the closeness of the Scopitone to industries (the jukebox industry, in the case of consumption; the film industry in the case of production) which were not those of television and recording. Keazor’s study of the movement of clips onto handheld devices, and the mutations of form which have resulted, moves the concerns of Orillard’s account into new technological and industrial contexts. Increasingly, the platforms hosting clips are no longer those, like Youtube, which recall the televisual screen, but, rather, the complex spaces of smartphone apps and videogames.
- 11 A cluster of articles in this issue take up the question of performance styles developed outside the videoclip and their absorption within it. Indeed, the accumulated repertory of videoclips, since their inception, is full of evidence to nourish any future study of bodies, gestures and corporeal expression. If the realm of politics itself is a site of gesture and iconography, Boidy asks in his contribution to this issue, how have videoclips incorporated these elements of performance and adapted them to the presentation of music? To what extent does the videoclip reinvent the gestural languages of politics? With very different concerns and examples, Rossi’s detailed analysis of a clip for the song “L’homme au bouquet de fleurs” by the artist Maxime Le Forestier, uses the presence and performance styles of a well-known film actor, Daniel Auteuil, to set up a complex set of relationships between song, clip, cinema and the real. In the videoclip, a recognizable actor both inhabits a fictional world, as character, and enacts the intrusion of the outside world (that, paradoxically, of another medium) into the space of the clip.
- 12 Elina Djebbari’s study of music videos in Mali is in part about the relationship of these clips to a variety of cultural “elsewheres”. Mali dance clips are engaged partly in the production of what Djebbari calls “images endogènes,” images of local cultural expression which counterbalance the rampant transnational intertextuality of Malien televisual culture. The audiovisual mediascape of Mali is crossed (and saturated) by programming from South Asia and the two Americas. In this context, representations of Mali dance in videoclips represent the assertion of local cultural traditions. Their repetition of these traditions, even as it risks turning them into performative clichés,

acts as a protection of sorts against the endless importation of images and sounds from elsewhere.

- 13 Finally, in her study of the music industry in the northern Indian region of Garhwal, Florence Nowak shows how the circulation of clips across a multiplicity of platforms serves to produce a particular collective attention which binds together local and diasporic populations, crosses various kinds of social boundaries, and prompts ongoing discussion and judgement. The videoclip, in Garhwal, is one of the cultural forms most engaged in circulating Garhwal language and gesture. Indeed, like Djebbari's analysis of Malien videoclips, Novak's study invites further research into the role of the clip in preserving endogenous sounds, gestures and styles amidst the broader internationalization of media cultures.

Conclusion

- 14 I concluded my 1988 article on music video by engaging with the politics of "recontextualization" which seemed so central to the meaning of the videoclip in its first ten years of popularity. If that concern seems quaint now, this is not simply because the artistic, "postmodern" act of recontextualizing cultural fragments has come to seem banal, perhaps even exhausted. Rather, "recontextualization" now seems to be intimately connected to those social and cultural forces which have produced a global media culture and innumerable forms of resistance to it. The social study of translation teaches us that each act of cultural borrowing or transfiguration takes place between languages, traditions and places of unequal power. Every videoclip, I would argue, is a hieroglyph of such unequal relationships, and it is through such hieroglyphs that we may begin to think of recontextualization otherwise. In its benign form, the inequality manifests itself in relationships between the videoclip and other media, like cinema, opera or television, which possess greater or lesser degrees of cultural stature. The clip will almost never incorporate elements of the televisual or cinematic without betraying the reverence or contempt in which it holds these other media.
- 15 At a more politically profound level, and as several articles in this issue of Volume demonstrate, the clip is marked by the conflicts between tradition and novelty, localism and transnationalism, or past and present which are the condition of almost all musical forms in the world. Decontextualization, within this condition, is less the artful reference to something outside than a conflicted participation in processes of cultural change which often seem unstoppable. At the global level, the clip serves as an agent of preservation for musics, languages and gestures, but it may also be a key site of their erosion and eventual disappearance. If the videoclip has, indeed, become "minor" as cultural and artistic form, it is nonetheless, in its abundance and ubiquity, a highly revealing index of our contemporary cultural condition.

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