Creation and erasure: music video as a signaletic form of practice

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Abstract
This article addresses the affective potentials of music video, identifying music video as a “signaletic form of practice.” Following Steven Shaviro’s notion of (post-)cinematic affect, the article demonstrates how cinematic affect is most clearly revealed when the images are released from traditional filmic vision—as shown in an analysis of the music video for OK Go’s “WTF?” The article thereby also points towards the central role played by audiovisual modulation in conveying affect in music videos. It is shown how the site of such modulation is frequently that of the human body and how that, in some music videos, the human body is treated as an electronically or digitally coded signal rather than as a visual transcription or representation. As such, music video situates itself as an integral part of a new audiovisual regime of signaletic affect.

Keywords: music video; signal; postproduction; affect; audiovisuality; morphing; data-moshing; OK Go

In his seminal account of the language of new media, Lev Manovich notes that “electronic art from its very beginning was based on a new principle: the modification of an already existing signal.” Here, Manovich identifies two important aspects of the signal: firstly, its pervasiveness in current (electronic) art and communication; and secondly, its essential mutability—the fact that signals, whether analog or digital, are often subjected to some kind of modification and that this modification is often important in itself. As such, the paradigmatic shift from sign to signal proposed in this volume could be comprehended as a shift from the sign understood as a carrier of information or signification to the signal understood as an object of modulation or modification.

In a somewhat similar fashion to Manovich, French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud observes that today we inhabit a world of “signals already emitted.” As a consequence, aesthetic creation is now based on the modification of these already-emitted signals, or put otherwise, aesthetic creation is now oriented towards postproduction instead of actual production. Bourriaud notes how “[a]rtists today program forms more than they compose them: they remix available forms and make use of data.” This means that aesthetic creation today is as concerned with the modulation of preexisting signals or data as it is with the

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production of new signals or data. What is important is not necessarily to create something entirely new from raw materials but rather to transform or modulate the signals already emitted, to use the existing signals as raw material.

Following these observations, this article focuses on music video as a specific signaletic form of practice. In at least two ways, the medium of music video expresses the tendencies of signaletic modification and postproduction identified by Manovich and Bourriaud. Firstly, the images of music video often function more as signals to be modulated, distorted or in any other way digitally or electronically manipulated than as actual representational images—what arrests us about music video visuals is not as much the image as an actual representation of reality as it is the image as an affective and ever transforming materiality, the image as “the site of a permanent scratching.”4 In this way, the production of images in music videos is often best understood as nothing but “the first stage of post-production,”5 and in music video, this has the consequence that what is central to the images is more often the visual aftereffects they have been exposed to than it is what they actually show.

Secondly, the musical recording is “reproduced” in the audiovisual form of the music video, so that any music video is in a way based on the visual reworking of an already existing musical material. Thus, I claim that, as a signaletic form of practice, the medium of music video has been particularly important for the exploration of the relations between visual and musical signals. In this, music videos are a central component or driving force of what Steven Shaviro has addressed as “a new regime of perception and affect, one that is just starting to take shape in this world of [. . .] electronic, digital media.”6 In analyzing Chris Cunningham’s music video for Björk’s “All Is Full of Love,” Shaviro notes how Cunningham’s music videos “articulate a very different logic of sensation than those that dominated most of the twentieth century.”7 I make the case that this alternative logic of sensation is not only restricted to Cunningham’s music videos but that it is also a more general characteristic of many other music videos. Shaviro has proposed that just like the Deleuzian movement-image gave way to the time-image in postwar cinema, maybe now the time-image is giving way to “a new sort of audiovisual or multimedia image.”8 If this is indeed true, then music video certainly plays a significant part in this shift.

Taking my cue from Shaviro’s theories of cinematic and postcinematic affect,9 I show how certain music videos are best regarded as “machines for generating affect.”10 Music videos often subvert the traditional structures of representational meaning that we confront in other audiovisual media, turning instead towards a concern with modulation, materiality, and the non-representational. With a recent video that features a striking visual effect and actively encourages postproductional remixing as my main example (OK Go’s “WTF?” directed by Tim Nackashi), I show how music video often operates through a constant modulation of its images. While my example is quite new, it is important to note that this tendency to visually manipulate the image is not in any way restricted to recent music videos. Firstly, it has always been a recurrent feature in music video, as can be witnessed by revisiting some of the first writings on the genre. Pat Aufderheide observes that in music video “the very act of image manipulation is the action,”11 while E. Ann Kaplan notes that with such visual modulations, “the instability of objects becomes the norm; one thing is transmuted into another.”12 Secondly, the tendency to modulate the moving image is historically prefigured in forms antedating (and sometimes anticipating) the music video, such as early silent cinema, animation, visual music, expanded cinema, etc. As such, the visual inventiveness seen in many music videos is more a matter of reinvention than actual invention in and of itself. Thus, the videos discussed in these pages seem to strengthen Gene Youngblood’s suggestion that “[t]here are no digital images that have not been prefigured in painting, film and video,”13 with music video performing the dual function of experimenting with the image and familiarizing certain imaging techniques.

(POST)CINEMATIC AFFECT

Shaviro’s concept of cinematic affect seems inextricably tied to the bodily materiality of certain cinematic images and sounds. Shaviro links cinematic affect to the non-signifying powers within the image and describes the process through
which films are able to generate affect as follows: “Film’s virtual images do not correspond to anything actually present, but as images, or as sensations, they affect me in a manner that does not leave room for any suspension of my response.” Speaking of some close-ups from two films by Jean-Luc Godard (a pebble held in a hand in Weekend and some coffee swirling in a cup in Two or Three Things I Know about Her, respectively), Shaviro notes how there is something in these images that makes them “insist before, and persist beyond, the act of recognition that stabilizes and rationalizes vision,” something which “forces us to stop regarding them as referential objects.”

The affective quality of the Godard-images that Shaviro speaks of obviously lies beyond their merely representational function. According to Shaviro, affect comes to the fore when the images endure beyond the time it takes for the viewer to actually decode what they show. If the image outlasts this act of recognition, our attention drifts, and we slowly start to notice the very materiality of the objects depicted, their specific form, and so on. In the Godard example, Shaviro also notes how the images are held for an unusually long time so that duration becomes “an independent dimension of the image and is no longer a function of the time needed for cognition and action.” In this way, the prolonged duration of the images invests them with an affective or bodily quality as well as with another type of temporality, movement having ceased.

However, cinematic affect can be related not only to the material aspects of the images but also to the very flow of images. As Claire Colebrook writes in her book on Deleuze, cinematic vision can function in such a way that “its process of becoming—the disconnection or singularity of its images—is displayed,” and in this process, we are taken “away from actualized objects and wholes to the very flow of images.” Temporal and spatial disjunctions manifest themselves directly in the images and allow us to perceive cinematic images and sounds in their materiality. According to Nigel Thrift, these constant audio-visual re-workings of cinematic time and space are quite effective in generating affect—he writes that “the film and video screen have become a powerful means of conveying affect in our culture, drawing on a set of historically formed stock repertoires for manipulating space and time.”

What then are these “stock repertoires?” Thrift points to morphing (to which I return below), but within cinematic forms such manipulations of time and space are perhaps most commonly achieved through montage. However, montage functions altogether differently in “signaletic” postcinematic forms than it does in traditional cinema. On this subject, Lev Manovich writes that while “classical cinematic montage creates the illusion of a coherent space and hides its work, electronic montage openly presents the viewer with an apparent visual clash of different spaces.” The way that this is achieved is sometimes through editing, for instance, by means of the occasionally very rapid editing of music video that creates obvious disjunctions in time and space. But, in digital cinema and music video, montage just as often happens within the image by means of superimposition, compositing, or other ways of layering multiple images on top of or within each other. This allows for the creation of new forms of space and time, as well as for the complex coexistence of multiple contrasting spaces, speeds, and times within the same image, evident in an entire range of music videos.

CREATION AND ERASURE: OK GO’S “WTF?”

One such way of layering images in order to create spatial or temporal disjunctions is found in the video for OK Go’s “WTF?” By the use of one single visual effect, this video subtly exposes the very concept of cinema’s way of simulating movement on the basis of chains of individual images. The particular imaging technique applied in doing this seems to be a cinematic replication of the work of photographers such as Harold Edgerton and Thomas Eakins, Eakins’ photograph “Study in the Human Motion” being credited as the original inspiration for the visual style of the video in a “Making of”—video that reveals how the video was simply shot against a green-screen background with the visual effect added in postproduction (Figure 1).

“WTF?” is composed of one successive take without any apparent cuts and the camera does not move once. The band simply moves in and out of the screen, wearing colorful clothes and
carrying colorful objects while lip-synching to the song. As such, the video would probably seem quite tedious if not for the digital effects applied to the images. In the video, each frame is successively layered in the background, and hereby, the image is constantly layered within itself creating a perplexing kind of multiple-exposure where the performers carry a visual trail of themselves after them as they move around. In this way, the video lets the passage of time constantly and directly manifest itself spatially in the image. The effect is one of simultaneously embedding each passing moment in the background of the image and of partaking in a slow process of erasure, as new frames are layered on top of old ones. In this process, in this ever emergent “flow of images,” the cinematic process of becoming is revealed, and an affective materiality comes forward. In Deleuzian terms, this image-effect could be likened to that of the crystalline image, which involves a “double movement of creation and erasure”\textsuperscript{23} in the sense that “[e]ach circuit obliterates and creates an object.”\textsuperscript{24} The images of “WTF?” thereby enter into a dual process of creation-erasure, expressing a simultaneous present and past within the same image, a simultaneity of the actual and the virtual.

Through these continual visual multiplications, the images of the video also seem to function in a manner not unlike the way that popular music generally functions. In the video, the image becomes remarkably “polyphonic” and shares some similarity to musical progression in general where some notes keep lingering alongside others only to become gradually wiped away by the passage of time—here, some images keep lingering only to become slowly erased. The images of the video also enter into a more direct relation with the actual piece of music in question, the song “WTF?”: the image seems to be pulsating, a feature it shares with the pulsating sound of the bass, and the striking character of the visuals also resonates somewhat with the (by the standards of popular music) odd timing of the song in 5/4. Just like there seems to be one beat too many compared to the standard timing in 4/4, there constantly seems to be one image too many. As such, in “WTF?,” we see the image effects and the transmutation of the image rather than the image as just a representation of something—we experience the image as a directly affective, pulsating signal, rather than as a sign that carries a fixed meaning in any traditional sense.

It is also worth noticing the fact that “WTF?” is not without its precedents. While the effect applied to achieve the visual look of the video is surely a digital effect, predigital music videos have experimented with similar effects. Already in The Jacksons’ “Blame It on the Boogie”\textsuperscript{25} from 1978 as well as in Amii Stewart’s “Knock on Wood” from 1979 comparable visual multiplications are evident. Similarly, in the video for Earth, Wind and Fire’s “Let’s Groove” from 1981, the performers carry a trail of images after them as they move, as is also the case in Kool & The Gang’s “Get Down on It” from the same year,
and parts of Neneh Cherry’s “Buffalo Stance” from 1989. A brief passage of Stereo MC’s “Connected” from 1992 also sees the images of the singer being constantly layered in the background, and the technique has also been used after OK Go’s video in Shit Robot’s “Take ‘em Up.” This indicates a strong continuity between current digital imaging and predigital imaging in music video, attesting how the modulation of a signal has always been an important part of music video, even prior to the advent of digital imaging techniques.

After the video’s premiere, the band initiated a video remix project as their fans were encouraged to make their own remix of the video. On OK Go’s website numerous different versions of the video are to be found, all of them made by fans. In these video-remixes, the original video is very concretely treated as a “signal already emitted,” with all of these videos using the imagery as a moldable material to be exposed to other visual effects. Moreover, the band has even made an app available for download in which you can record your own images while subjecting them to a modulation-effect that is quite similar to the effect seen in “WTF?” In this way, even the body of the viewer can become part of the “signaletic modulation” of this video (Figure 2).

THE HUMAN BODY AS A MODIFIABLE SIGNAL

Such modulation of the human body or of its visual depiction is a staple element of music video. The modulation that takes place in music videos is frequently centered on the key affective sites of the human body, the human face, or the human voice (as, for instance, in Chris Cunningham’s videos for Aphex Twin). In this way, the body of the musical performer is often caught in a state of constant transformation. A well-known example is the use of morphing, as famously seen in a section of Michael Jackson’s “Black or White” (again with a predigital forebear in Godley and Crème’s “Cry”). The effect of morphing is one of destabilizing the image: according to Nigel Thrift, morphing “provides a visible flux of becoming” in that the image never settles on a stable representation of the human body but rather lets it pass through a continual transformation. Vivian Sobchack goes even further in claiming that the ultimate consequence of morphing is that “its very

Figure 2. Still from my own “WTF?” made using the downloadable app “Make Your Own ‘WTF?’”
fluidity destabilizes dominant Western metaphysics (primarily focused on essences, categories, and identities, including those of gender and race) and dramatizes instead a ‘process metaphysics’ that is less about ‘being’ than about ‘becoming.’28 Indeed, the persistent modulation of image, body, and voice in music video means than neither exists in a finite state of being but rather in an endless process of becoming.

The visual modulations seem to have accelerated throughout the history of music video, particularly as the use of digital imaging techniques has increased. Recent remarkable examples of such visual modulations include those videos that apply the effect of data-moshing, for instance, The Presets’ “Are You the One?,” Chairlift’s “Evident Utensil,” and Kanye West’s “Welcome to Heartbreak.” In these videos, the image appears to pixelate out of shape and gradually becomes an abstract texture. At some point, this texture is then somehow frozen and exposed on top of the next image, creating an eerie sense of superimposition and a complex interplay between structure/texture, background/foreground, depth/surface, letting one image merge with another. One image seems to be melting into the next, again in a gradual process of creation and erasure.

I find that there are two reasons why music videos are open to such visual modulation. The first relates to the cross-fertilizations between music and image in music video. Since the visuals of any music video are created on the basis of a preexisting piece of music, it would seem obvious to think of a music video as a visualization of music. However, in this process of visualizing music, vision also becomes “musicalized” as the images are structured around or react to musical features, as suggested by both Carol Vernallis and Kevin Williams.29 In most music videos, the image enters into a relation with a musical feature at some point or another, whether it is an aspect of rhythm, melody, harmony, musical structure, or something else. The effect of this musicalization of the image is often that the image becomes multiple in attempting to mirror the multitracked nature of music. Thus, the musicality of the image assists in disrupting the standard ordering of vision as the dominant force of perception in audiovisual forms, giving birth to a specific kind of “audio-vision” in which music and image mutually remediate each other.30

The second reason why music videos seem caught in a visual flux relates to the technical differences between the filmic image (based on celluloid photography) and the video image (based on scanning). Unlike the filmic image, the video image is not a discrete unit but is a signal born from scanning. This means that the electronic video image is infinitely caught in a process of becoming, repeating its own cycle of creation-erasure, since an image based on scanning gradually creates and wipes away its contents in the cycle of each circuit of the scanning process. As Philip Auslander points out, this means that the electronic image “is always simultaneously coming into being and vanishing; there is no point at which it is fully present.”31 That the image remains fundamentally fluctuating is probably part of the reason why so many videos embody visual transformation.

This seems to continue with the digital image. It no longer exists as an indexical trace of light on a strip of film or of particles on tape but reduces its content to a binary code of 1s and 0s. This also means that the body depicted exists only as code, data, or information and that it becomes even more open to modification—the body becomes established “as a coded body and as a virtual body (i.e. a body that can be recoded and rewritten),”32 or as a signaletic body. The video for Radiohead’s “House of Cards” provides an informative example. This video was not recorded with a traditional camera but instead by aid of LiDAR real-time 3D laser scanning equipment where a laser beam is used to map physical features by detecting the proximity of objects from the sensor. Everything in the video, from the lead-singer to the cityscape, is depicted as an endless array of small blue dots on a black background that are sometimes slowly wiped away, again in a movement of creation-erasure. After its debut, the video has been released online as Google Code to be freely modified by internet-users—allowing anyone to alter the code and create new images. As with the OK Go video, this video is now also a “signal already emitted.” As these examples illustrate, music video is today more an online phenomenon than a televisual one. Music videos are now mainly distributed and accessed online, and new music
video types have come into existence as a direct consequence of this translocation from the TV screen to the computer screen. One of these new types is the interactive music video\textsuperscript{33} that allows the user to interact with the image and/or sound of the video in real-time, concretely leaving the modulation of the signal to the user, offering images and music as a partly moldable material.

**SIGNALETIC MODULATION**

The continual audiovisual modulations of music video only rarely allow for any stability of meaning. Every other moment, something changes. The aspiring synaesthetic perception offered in music video seems to further strengthen its affective potential—the cross-sensual and multi-modal character of music video generates meanings that are more directly affective and less directly “decodable.” What we experience in music videos is thus often a reversal of the usual structuring of sound and image in audiovisual forms—here, we sometimes feel as if the sounds generate the images and not the other way around. While it is of course in many ways an untenable approach to move from a few examples to a general characterization of an entire field of expression (especially one as heterogeneous as music video), one need not see many music videos to feel convinced that such transmutational images as the ones described here hold a special place in music video or, at least, that they are nothing uncommon. The transformations of the audiovisual relation that take place between music and image in music video succeed in effectively changing the usual structures of cinematic space and time, often resulting in some kind of visual multiplication—and this leads to a partial destabilization of the regular patterns of cinematic vision and audition. While other less innovative practices surely exist within music video than those concerned with signaletic modulations and while music video does not at all operate alone in reworking the audiovisual language, it is quite safe to say that music video has always been associated with pushing the audiovisual language of combining sounds and moving images forwards—ultimately suggesting that music video always has been an important site of signaletic modulation and that it continues to be so today.

**Notes**

1. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2001), 126.
2. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction* (New York: Lucas & Sternberg, 2007), 17.
3. Ibid., 17.
4. Ibid., 44.
5. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 303.
6. Steven Shaviro, “The Erotic Life of Machines,” *Parallax* 25 (2002): 4.
7. Ibid., 4.
8. Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 87.
9. Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*.
10. Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*, 4.
11. Pat Aufderheide, “The Look of the Sound,” in *Watching Television*, ed. Todd Gitlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 125.
12. E. Ann Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 74.
13. Gene Youngblood, “Cinema and the Code,” in *Future Cinema*, ed. Jeffrey Shaw and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2003), 156.
14. Shaviro. *The Cinematic Body*, 46.
15. Ibid., 29.
16. Ibid.
17. Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 34.
18. Ibid., 31.
19. Nigel Thrift, “Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect,” *Geografiska Annaler* 86B (2004): 72.
20. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 150.
21. Many music videos feature rather complex audiovisual universes of manipulated spaces and times. Such videos frequently slow down, speed up, freeze, or reverse time, at the same time as they fragment, contract, or hybridize several spaces into one. Another OK Go video, “End Love,” is one such video, in that it frequently changes between different techniques for manipulating time in the moving image, from stop-motion to slow-motion to sped-up images and onward, simultaneously falsely masquerading itself as one successive take.
22. In fact, it seems to be a recurrent feature of most of OK Go’s videos that they are composed of one single take or that they seek to give this impression, even when it is not the case. Such long takes in music videos signify both “presence” (the long shot as “unmediated” or “immediate”) and self-reflectivity (the long shot as involving a lot of preparation and as an alien counteract to the traditional quick edits of music video).
23. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* [1985], trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta.
M.B. Korsgaard

(London: Continuum, 2008), 44. Deleuze seems to import the term “double movement of creation and erasure” from Alain Robbe-Grillet.

24. Ibid.
25. Thanks to Damian Kulash of OK Go for calling my attention to this video by The Jacksons.
26. http://okgo.net/2009/12/25/make-your-own-wtf (accessed May 15, 2012).
27. Thrift, “Intensities of Feeling,” 76.
28. Vivian Sobchack, Meta-Morphing: Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick-Change (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xii.
29. Carol Vernallis, Experiencing Music Video (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 44; Kevin Williams, Why I [Still] Want My MTV (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2003), 13.
30. Michel Chion, Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
31. Philip Auslander, Liveness (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 44.
32. Williams, Why I [Still] Want My MTV, 158.
33. Mathias Korsgaard, “Music Video Transformed,” in The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics, ed. Claudia Gorbman, John Richardson and Carol Vernallis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).