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Redefining Music Video

At the time of writing, Justin Bieber's music video for 'Baby ft. Ludacris' is pushing half a billion views on YouTube, making it the site's most viewed video of all time. To look at this statistic another way, it's the equivalent of every single person in Australia actively choosing to watch this clip on repeat for 1.4 hours. The Cambridge Dictionary defines Music Video as a "short film made to advertise a popular song" (2011) and it would seem that this clip is doing just that. Perhaps, but with sales of 6.4 million units, 'Baby' is thoroughly dwarfed by Bing Crosby's 'White Christmas', having sold 50 million units since 1942, well before MTV (IFPI, 2011, Guinness World Records, 2007). YouTube views do not necessarily translate into song sales. We should ask ourselves: are all Music Videos made to advertise a song? Music Video is much more than just an advertisement for a popular song – the way we define Music Video has not kept pace with the genre's evolution.

Further to the problems with the Cambridge definition, the Oxford Dictionary defines Music Video as "a videotaped performance of a recorded popular song, usually accompanied by dancing and visual images interpreting the lyrics" (2011). This definition completely ignores the abstraction, motion graphics and experimental nature of many music videos – both old and new. At the same time, the Merriam-Webster dictionary fails to provide any definition at all. By analysing examples of Music Videos in the context of where and how

they're now viewed, the attributes they tend to share, as well as the traditional and non-traditional genres on which they draw, we can establish a better definition.

First we should discuss the history of Music Video through to the current state of the art. The first proto-Music Video was likely created in 1894 when George Thomas combined music and images on glass slides. These “illustrated songs” were designed for public viewing in theatres and rapidly became popular, turning a great profit for music publishers (WGBH, 2004). Over the coming decades, various forms of “musical short films” and “promotional clips” were produced for a number of different media, primarily capitalising on the popularity of – and inspired by – musical feature films (Keazor & Wübbena, 2009). By the 1960s the influence of experimental film had crept in, and artists such as the Beatles were testing different ways to package and promote their music (Pollick, 2011). Artists often sent a video of themselves performing a song to a TV studio when they were unable to make an appearance in person. This may account for the Oxford Dictionary definition, although it would suggest the story of Music Video stopped there. In 1966 the Beatles released ‘Rain’ with an accompanying promotional clip. The clip features various on-location shots of the Beatles at Chiswick House in London, during many of which the artists are neither singing nor playing instruments. This promotional clip is often cited as being amongst the first to look and sound like a modern music video (Austerlitz, 2007). Towards the 1980s, Music Video showcase TV shows became popular in Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada, and the medium came into its own when MTV – a dedicated Music Video cable TV channel – was launched in the USA in 1981.

With more than a touch of irony, the first Music Video aired on MTV was The Buggles’ ‘Video Killed the Radio Star’. Even with its own TV channel and space to innovate and evolve, Music Video’s roots were not forgotten. The larger-than-life musical genre obviously still exerts its influence, as evidenced in Music Videos such as Madonna’s

‘Material Girl’. This tribute to – or perhaps parody of – Marilyn Monroe’s ‘Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend’ contains the same costuming, camera moves, lighting, and set (Rybacki & Rybacki, n.d.). Even very modern Music Videos appropriate the abandonment of narrative, stroboscopic editing and montage of 1920s and 30s Russian experimental cinema. Similarly, The Smashing Pumpkins’ ‘Tonight, Tonight’ is a blatant (albeit loving) repackaging of Georges Méliès’ 1902 visual-effects laden ‘Le Voyage dans la Lune’. After helping to better establish this genre, the demand for Music Video consumption itself has meant that the MTV brand has been very successful. However, the genre has not been without its problems.

There has always been a tenuous relationship between Music Videos and record companies. The record company argument is typically “why should we fund something we can’t directly make any money from?”. Floating somewhere between advertisement, video art and short film, the genre is a little tricky to pin down. Most unfortunately for the record companies, technological change has brought a solution to their problem they may not like. Better and cheaper home computers, software, sound and video equipment have seen a rise in independent producers who can now create professional-looking and sounding songs and Music Videos without record company money. Software and internet sites like iTunes, launched in 2001 and YouTube, 2005, have had a democratising effect on the digital media industry (MIT, 2010). Music Videos can now turn a profit themselves through advertising-supported models. Severing contracts with record companies, bands such as Radiohead and Nine Inch Nails can “finally have a direct relationship with the audience as [they] see fit and appropriate” (Reznor, 2007). Damian Kulash Jr., lead singer of the band Ok Go, highlights that music revenue models are changing and that a large portion of that band’s income is now generated through sponsorship and advertising in the creation and online viewing of the music videos themselves – as opposed to song sales (2011). In fact, Ok Go ‘ditched their label’ after a stoush with them over YouTube embedding rights (Nosowitz, 2010). In contrast

to the Cambridge definition, it could be argued that some Music Videos are not designed to advertise a song, but to stand as works of art in their own right. As YouTube continues to champion viral media in the form of videos designed to promote themselves, the internet may be killing the TV star and the MTV era may be over.

Internet star Pogo, through his Music Video-cum-songs such as ‘Alice’, hopes to “make the world a better place with [his] music” (Bertke, 2010). In his new ‘World Remix’ project, Pogo is capitalising on the goodwill of his fans, asking them to fund the production of his next tracks – here, the money comes before the song. This purpose of this World Remix project, in turn, is to document and reflect various cultures around the world. Thus, Music Videos are not always used to sell a song or promote an artist, but sometimes to promote a social imperative. The purpose may be to raise money for charity, enhance awareness of a cause or even to act as political propaganda amongst many others. In 2006, rock band U2 sold one of their Music Videos online to raise money for Hurricane-Katrina affected New Orleans residents. Meanwhile, the Sri-Lankan government have labelled refugee-champion dance music artist M.I.A. a “terrorist sympathiser”, and threatened to prosecute fans who repost her Music Videos (Sawyer, 2010). Such is the versatility and power of the medium.

So if a Music Video isn’t strictly about promoting a song, then what is it? A Music Video is first and foremost a song and imagery. They’re typically short- around the length of the single song itself and not too much more, and so may be referred to as a type of short film. There are instances of Music Videos containing multiple songs such as Missy Elliot’s ‘Pass That Dutch’, however such a sequence should more correctly be referred to as two Music Videos mixed together, in much the same way that the two songs are said to be mixed together. Given newer technologies and the ease with which Music Videos can now be created, a song need not already be popular to deserve a Music Video. There should of course

be a relationship between the audio and video in these clips, however the degree to which this is achieved is more a concern of how effective the Music Video is, rather than whether or not it qualifies it as an exemplar of the genre in the first instance. There is an emphasis on the production being musically-driven; while non-music breaks are accepted, with too little music it simply becomes a short film. The video component must be deliberately constructed, the automatically-generated video popular in audio playing software is music visualisation – not Music Video. While some interactive Music Videos have been produced, it seems Music Video is still generally regarded a linear medium. This may change in the future. In terms of content, this is as diverse as film-making itself. Most importantly, just as a song is designed for repeat-listening, a Music Video should be designed for repeat-viewing perhaps through a general avoidance of literal narrative, and the incorporation of strong and stimulating imagery and technical or creative innovation.

As we edge closer to a new definition, it's interesting to note the case of Wikipedia. Often disallowed as a reference in academia, it actually has an error rate similar to the Encyclopedia Britannica (Giles 2005). Curiously, the definition in Wikipedia's dictionary – Wiktionary – is more accurate than those provided by Oxford and Cambridge: "a motion picture produced to accompany a song, for promotional or artistic purposes" (2011). This definition still fails to accommodate Music Videos that may have been created simultaneously with the music, or even before it. In 1995, pioneer Mashup artists Emergency Broadcast Network released what has been described as the first entirely video-sample based song, '3:7:8' (Pearson, 2011). The artists took video streams from cable TV and edited them to make music. In the resulting Music Video, both the audio and video feed into each other – we can't say that the video was created to accompany the song because technically the video existed first. Many other artists have followed since. We may say that this is instead video art. However in the end, if today's consumer follows a hyperlink to such a video and it looks

and sounds like a Music Video, how is it not a Music Video? Many of these born-from-video songs such as Pogo's 'Alice' (with 5.7m views on YouTube) are available for sale and consumption alongside more traditionally-produced songs. Even celebrated Music Videos such as Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' and Lady Gaga's 'Telephone' both subjugate the music to extensive non-music audio and cinematic narrative breaks. Perhaps here too, the song accompanies the video – not the other way around. To say that all music videos are created to accompany a song is simply not true.

A literature review reveals that the definitions of the Music Video genre in many publications are inaccurate or inadequate. To describe a Music Video as simply an advertisement for a song or a videotaped performance severely limits both the scope and potential of the genre. They can be used to entertain, provoke thought and promote various causes – not just to sell songs. Today's Music Videos may even place an emphasis on promoting themselves, as revenue models evolve. As technologies and the media through which Music Video is consumed have changed, so too has the genre and the way the Music Videos are approached and constructed. The writer proposes a more accurate definition of Music Video to better reflect its place in the current media landscape: "a short film integrating a song and imagery, produced for promotional or artistic purposes", and has updated Wiktionary accordingly.

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