

Carol Vernallis:
The Present and Future of Music Video Aesthetics

One might feel down about music video's current state. Budgets have been slashed and fewer videos are being made. Today's videos can look as if they're aping devices of the eighties, as if what we saw then reflected not musical styles or the zeitgeist but simply economics. While it has always been nearly impossible to make a living directing music video, now even the top directors like to say „I'm going on vacation – I'm going to direct a music video,“ because they don't get paid much to do it.

I'm not discouraged, however. Artists and technicians in other media and genres are laboring under similar digital constraints. (Even the New York Times recently cut 10% of its staff and shut down foreign bureaus.) Music video has always been mutable, and I think it will survive this transitional period. Perhaps this moment also presents opportunities. If we listen carefully and attend patiently, we will learn new things about the possibilities of the form.

I've claimed that music video is strange, and things may be getting stranger. Trolling the web produces unusual experiences: as we come across videos set adrift between election news clips, exhortations about how to keep your mate sexually engaged, and the newest fad diets; or click among streams of text, snapshots, and other YouTube links, music videos can now become the anchor rather than the source of discontinuity. Has the form of music video become the supertext? Music video's elongations and instances of condensation; its alternating flurries, thickets and wide open spaces map onto larger structures. Does the web's simultaneous windows and blinking, jumpy advertising shape music video aesthetics? On a webpage, music videos compete with lurid flashing pop up ads and other scrolling devices. So why do the song and image project further than they ever did? The videos themselves still want to claim a liberatory otherness: „I kissed a girl and I liked it,“

Is music video's soul now distributed across music videos? Is the true home of music video now the film trailer, the mash-up, the wedding video, the undergraduate flash project, the DIY aesthetic? I do not doubt that music video will soon be everywhere, perhaps more diffuse, perhaps more simultaneous. Does this mean the artform has new means of realizing itself?