

A Dive Into the World of Music Videos

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	1
Abstract	2
Body.....	3
Images	13
Conclusion.....	16
Works Cited.....	18

List of Figures

Figure 1: Robert Paynter, Thriller.....13

Figure 2: Scott Cunningham, Be Humble.....13

Figure 3: Brian Freesh, This is America.....14

Figure 4: Colin Tilley, All That Really Matters.....14

Figure 5: Ilya Naishuller, False Alarm.....15

Abstract

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This thesis will analyze five music videos that sparked my interest influenced my artistry and continued my infatuation in creating them. It will attempt to methodically examine the chosen pieces in detail. The five will include Michael Jackson's "Thriller", The Weeknd's "False Alarm", Kendrick Lamar's "Humble", Childish Gambino's "This is America" and "All That Matters" by Justin Bieber.

Keywords: Lighting, Shot design, Color, Fog, Spacial Depth

Body

I still remember the first music video I saw at the age of six, it was “Black or White” by Michael Jackson and I was absolutely in love with the visuals in that video even though my tender heart could not fully understand the concept which was an attempt to unify different races but I loved watching it. My passion progressed as I aged and so did the complexity of the shots, scenes, stories and lighting designs. My passion for film developed entwined with my love for music. Seeing the synergy between the two in music videos was mind boggling and amazing to me. The music video added a visual layer to the music that was priceless and essential once executed effectively. It often offered more context and further explained the world that the song existed in or belonged to. They provided the stories behind the songs and revealed hidden messages that were hidden in lyrics that sometimes escaped the casual listener or it added a whole new meaning to the song.

Music videos were first described as illustrated songs, filmed inserts, promotional (promo) films, promotional clips or film clips. The range of styles used for these music videos were wide, from animation, live action filming, documentaries and non-narrative approaches such as abstract film. “Music video has even found its way into movies, providing the central creative energy for a subgenre launched by Flash dance-films that weave loose narratives around hot dance sequences created by montage and that generate fast-selling videos” (Kinder). Flashdance was a film produced in 1983 which during certain sequences bared some similarities of music videos in the way the story was told. It went on to influence preceding films to follow suit. Some music videos were mini dramas reflecting the lyrics of the song when others had no remarkable relation to the song. There were used as marketing tools intended to promote the sale of the music and put a face to the songs. “...in 2013, Nielsen data contributors reported over 57.1 billion music video streams out of the 118 billion total streams. The top two total streams are instantaneously

recognizable as video hits: Baauer's "Harlem Shake" and PSY's "Gangnam Style" were streamed an astounding 490 million and 280 million times in 2013, respectively". The use of music videos started in 1894. A Short History of the Music Video" claims: "The use of illustrated songs started in the 19th century, when in 1894, sheet music publishers promoted sales of their song using a magic lantern. Come the 20s and the talkies, short musical films were made highlighting popular bands, vocalists and dancers. A decade later Art Deco-style animations and backgrounds started to feature."

Michael Jackson's "Thriller", directed by John Landis, which was more of a theatrical short than a music video stands the test of time and has laid the format for many others of its type to come. On December 2nd of 1983, the King of Pop change the whole landscape and set the bar for what music videos should offer to views with his single "Thriller" which was to become one of if not the most famous music video of all time. According to an interview with the video director, Landis and MSNBC the cost to produce "Thriller" was \$500,000 which was 10 times the average cost of music videos at that time (Celizic). Thriller presented the story behind the song. It was a 15 minute melodrama based on the blockbuster film, An American Werewolf in London. This model of music video still persists all these years later as Directors use all resources at their disposal to explore all creative possibilities. Years later we can still see the influence of Michael Jackson's "Thriller" in artist from all genres. Kanye west said that Jackson's "Thriller" was a major influencer of his "Runaway" music video. The video was thirty minutes long and it served as a promotional film for his 2010 album entitled "My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy". Runaway consisted of clips from each song off the album and it was held together by beautiful cinematography and a narrative directed by Kanye West himself. John Landis was the director for Thriller. He was known for his comedy and horror films before doing

Thriller. The video won two Grammy's and four MTV awards. "Thriller's stunning commercial success, extended length and conscious positioning within the horror film genre helped strengthen the link between music video and mainstream filmmaking" (Kinder). In this music video a young woman runs out of gas in a forested area. Her boyfriend warns her that he is different from other guys and he changes into a werewolf, chases and attacks her. In a theatre, Michael and his girlfriend are watching the previous scene play off on screen, she gets scared and they leave the theatre. As they make their way home, Michael performs Thriller and awakens the dead who join him in choreographed dance scenes to the beat of thriller. They all peruse his girlfriend as she tries to make her escape and runs into an abandoned house. As they approach her, she screams and jumps out of her dream. Michael embraces her and then looks at the camera revealing his werewolf eyes. The video references numerous horror films. Apart from the music what really drew me to this video was the story and the cinematography. I have always been a fan of night lighting and this video executes it incredibly with its moon lit skies and street lit foggy settings. The genre of the film is horror while the genre of the music is pop and both were entwined by use of the choreography implemented in many pop performances while the film stayed true to its horrific genre. The synchrony of the editing and the camera work of this music video captures and retains the energy of the song, not just the tempo of it but also the flow. This is reflected by the evolution of them both for the duration of the film. In the beginning of the film where the tempo of the music is at a slower pace, the camera movements match. They are slow tracking shots as they walk along the pavement and the cuts are few and far in between. But as the tempo of the song increases so does the intensity of the visuals and the camera work keeps up in pace and complexity. The editing picks up as well. The use of fog and low-key lighting added to the mystery and suspense of the story. Careful attention was paid to lighting the

scene as it was expected but I really enjoyed the layers of light added to each shot. For example in the shot showed in the screenshot below, the subjects in the foreground is obviously well lit from a light off camera, but spatial depth was constructed with the lights in the mid and background. The street lights in the distance were the white reference in the shot. A white reference is “a bright light in the frame that establishes in the viewer’s mind what is “normal” illumination and “normal” color. Many Dps do this by making sure there is a street lamp or bright house window or car headlight in frame and overexposed.” Apart from that they added depth to the shot and the fog that is lit in the midground also adds depth and supports the atmosphere of the video. “Remembering to light separately the three planes of lighting is just as important, if not more so, when shooting night scenes than any other time. Total black backgrounds outside at night look fake.” (Landau). What made this project so revolutionary is that it had never been done before and the world loved every minute of it. A short film of that length had never been offered as a music video before

Kendrick Lamar’s “Humble”, directed by Dave Meyers won a Grammy award for the best music video in 2017 and it was definitely my favorite music video for that year. There was no real narrative that would attract an audience but what kept eyes glued to the screen were the stunningly beautiful shot composition, lighting set ups, the mind-boggling camera tricks and most of all the symbolism and suggestive themes that made the video a masterpiece. The use of different settings sets a specific use of media language and the use of only black people identifies clearly that his video is just about his race and the ways his race is portrayed and how unfair it is. It is a media language for the society as a whole to reflect elements of the society. In this video different settings are used to communicate different messages. The music video opens with Kendrick Lamar dressed as a pope in a chapel of some sort to portray the commonly held

opinion that he is the leader of the new school of rappers. He reiterates this with a recreation of the last supper shot as well. Messages can be portrayed visually just as clearly and sometimes more clearly through the art of music videos than the actual lyrics. There were three shots that really had my mind sizzling and sent me into a research frenzy to figure out how they did each one. The first one, Kendrick Lamar is seen riding down a street with background severely distorted, even more extreme than a fisheye lens. It was actually filmed on a Gopro omni which is a rig that includes six synced gopros arranged in a cuboid to capture 360 degrees of video. When you film in 360 the camera give out a spherical image, but it is possible to stretch that sphere and fit all the information on the screen all at once without having to scroll to look around, they are a couple of different ways to do so, The technique used in Kendrick Lamar's video is called the "stereographic projection" effect or the "little planet". The go pro omni was secured to a stick of some sort that protruded from the handle bar of the bicycle while Kendrick Lamar rode. The other effect was a glitch effect. In this composition, they were four cameras arranged in a grid all next to each other all facing Kendrick Lamar. What we see is a shifting perspective frame by frame from one camera to the so we are basically teleporting from one perspective to the other really fast which is why it looks like it's one camera that is shaking. This makes for some really aggressive looking footage. This makes for more captivating and energetic shots. Lastly, I want to talk about the face follow shot which is probably the coolest shot in the entire music video. For this shot they had the camera mounted on this robotic arm called the bolt. They had to do preprogrammed moves constantly pointing straight at Kendrick's face. They clearly rehearsed the move and had Kendrick's face follow the movement so it gives the effect that Kendrick Lamar is controlling the camera with the movements of his face. I am of fan of a moving camera to propel the story and in this case, it works and was executed perfectly. In this music video the

camera movement compliments the pace and rhythm of the song. It adds to the energy of the shot and movement within the frame of the shot. Be it hand held, rigs, jibs, dollies, I love moving shots. These impressive shots are ambitious, complexed and they are used very effectively in the video. This music video was incredibly inspiring and it sparks the competitive nature that dwells inside of me to make something on this level, at this quality early in my career.

This is America is a video that brings to life the juxtaposition of black culture and black social issues. A portrayal of African American influence on pop culture through his dancing and his music on the backdrop of prominent social problems with the focus on violence. Glover is trying to make the point here that while for the general audience those two aspects are separate and contrast so much, for the artist themselves who Glover is representing, they intertwine and define each other. That's the reason for all the chaos. It is a surreal chaotic video on purpose, to show the conflicting identities Glover feels as an artist and a black man and what his audience sees him as to show how messed up it is to show how those two identities conflict. He stays at the center of attention throughout everything. When it comes to the progression of the video, the specifics of Glover's performances and the background actions progress with parallel of illusion. The violence in the background goes from singular murders to mass homicides paralleled by the audience of this culture losing its attention span which is represented by how the video starts off with long sequences and then transitions to quick camera pans. You could choose to watch the video and just focus on the dancing and the music and ignore all the violence and injustice in the background and even ignore what Glover and the other characters are doing when it is being cleaned up so quickly and Glover is commenting in that way that many people in real life who do make that choice to consume black art but ignore black social issues. But it is impossible for the artist themselves to ignore them because the video opens and

ends with Glover representing the artists, first perpetrating, then running from the system of violence, showing that all these artists could never separate themselves from the struggles of being black, including police brutality even if their fans try to. At one point the music has to stop and they have to face the world around them. "This is America" is the title for the song and music video performed by Childish Gambino and directed by him and Hiro Murai. The Director of photography was Larkin Seiple. Throughout the entire video Gambino moves through an empty warehouse while dancing, performing the song and interacting with a compilation of violent and chaotic scenes. The entire video was shot on Steadicam and consisted of six tracking shots that included an insane level of choreography and seamless and sometimes invisible cuts in between them. His seemingly joyful dancing contrast the anarchy that unfolds in the background throughout the entire video.

Long takes is a powerful technique used in film, in this particular instance it was used to introduce the audience to the scene and the environs. Long takes is also a tool directors use in an effort to instill a sense of uneasiness into the viewers mind. Since there are no cuts, the long takes smoothly draw in our attention and provokes us to focus on the setting and the moving parts of the entire scene. It was shot on 3-perf 35mm 500T film with the Arri Arricam ST 35mm Camera. Shooting on film was decided mainly because of the way it rendered skin tones. "I think film renders color far better than any digital camera out there," he says. "With film cameras, even if you underexpose, you still get a rich skin tone. There's still information in the shadows to pull from. And with digital, it starts to fall off and become a patina, and the skin looks kind of corpse-like.... Donald's skin looks great in the video, and there's all these windows around which create lots of reflections, so we weren't worried about highlights or overexposing. In fact, we tried to overexpose the image a bit more to make the grain tighter when we [brought] it down" (Dillard).

In an interview with Film Maker Magazine, Brian Freesh claimed that the decision was made to go with Kodak's fastest stock mainly because of the level of grain it offered. They used Zeiss Super Speeds and the Angenieux EZ-1 30-90mm zoom. For lighting they scheduled around the movement of the sun (which was tricky) and they also used the practical florescent lightbulbs in the warehouse to act as a fill for some of the shadows in the background. "We were going in and out of clouds throughout the day, but luckily we landed on this really lovely time of day, where the sunlight was coming through the windows but most of it wasn't quite directional."

(Mulcahey) For the later shots when the sun was out of the more desirable position, they used eighteen Digital Sputnik lights to act as a back light for Gambino. But for most of the day they worked with the light that the sun offered and adjusted the characters positions to suit. For this video Seiple claims that no video references were made and that all of their references for the shoot came from still photographers." We looked at Alex Webb's photography, which has a lot of texture and these colorful backgrounds. There's a great photo that René Burri took of these two men dancing in hard sunlight that was a big vibe for what we were shooting." (Mulcahey)

The hit song "All That Matters" by Justin Bieber required a visually striking music video to match the songs success. Colin Tilley who is one of my favorite music video directors took up the task of creating a beautiful work of art. Tilley has done many other high-profile music videos such as "Wild Thoughts" by Rihanna, "Anaconda" by Nicki Minaj, "No Chill" by Rick Ross and "Deuces" by Chris Brown just to name a few. Tilley did some very intriguing things with light and color in this piece and his use of spacial depth in his music videos are compelling and astonishing. His uses of contrast in lighting to highlight and exaggerate the special depth in his shots is what I admire most in his shot designs. The constant secession from dark to light to really brings to light (no pun intended) what he wants the audience to focus on within the shot

and gives us that genuine feeling of spacial depth. Not only does he use contrasting levels of lighting to exaggerate this spacial depth but he also uses contrasting colors to give his shots more perceivable depth and support the desired mood and tone of the scene. “We feel color. We also include them in our language” (Landau).

In this shot Justin Bieber is being lit in the foreground by some sort of soft light. It is noticeable that he is separated from the background by the bright lightbulbs hanging in the middle of the room and the background being lit on intervals by a harsh light creeping out from behind the wall. Another technique used in this shot is fog or haze. This is used as a surface for light to shine on so that more spacial depth could be scene. “A natural fog causes lights to glow and flare. Contrast is generally lower, and sharpness may be affected as well” (Goi). Fog also helps to balance the light in the shot by softening the shadows. When this light shine through from the back onto the fog, it creates another element of depth to the shot. “Back lighting is mandatory for making such atmospheric effects visible on the screen. Without adequate back light, atmospheric effects will lose their “bounce” and look drab and dull, if perceptible at all” (Viera). Yet another technique used to add spacial depth that is used in this shot is the use of the water on the floor. This creates a mirror like surface so whatever additional light that was already creating depth between the subject in the foreground and the background are now doubled. Paying attention, the reflections on the floor you can see all the hanging lights adding that additional level of depth. Colin Tilley pays extremely close attention when attempting to capture the right amount of certain colors and filling in the darker areas with the right amount of light without over lighting so that the cinematic feel can be attained and retained.

Another video that I fell in love with because of the way it was shot and edited was “False Alarm” by The Weeknd. The incredibly graphic music video is an action packed short about a bank robbery gone incredibly wrong for the bank robbers. A woman is held hostage in the melee in an attempt to escape from the police. The entire video was shot with a first-person perspective so the audience is immersed in the midst of the commotion. Eventually all the robbers die, either by the hands of the cops or each other. Before the last one dies, he frees the hostage and finally reveals who he was by looking into a broken mirror next to him. The fast tempo of the music is reflected in the pace of the music video. Usually the pacing is determined by cuts but this video was shot to make it seem like it was one continuous take though two cuts are noticeable if you are looking for them. The pacing was determined by the camera movement and the erratic movement of the subject that the camera was mounted onto. This worked for the chaotic scenes in the video. The shots were not hand held, it seemed to be mounted on the main characters head but it achieved the same outcome as hand held shots which in this case were to attain a feeling of real life unfolding before the viewer’s eyes. It was also used to intensify the drama unravelling and provoke a sense of uneasiness in the mind of the viewers.

Images

Figure 1:



“Thriller”
Robert Paynter

Figure 2:



“Be Humble”
Scott Cunningham

Figure 3:



“This is America”
Brian Fresh

Figure 4:



“All That Really Matters”
Colin Tilley

Figure 5:



"False Alarm"
Ilya Naishuller

Conclusion

Before attending the Savannah College of Art and Design I had never seen a short film before, or so I thought. After being introduced to this new realm that included a vast number and insane variety of short films I had come to the realization that I had been watching them quite often, just in the form of music videos. One can postulate that music videos today are the most profitable medium in which short films survive. While studying these music videos aforementioned, I learnt quite a lot that helped mold the way I think and feel about music videos. These videos amongst many others have influenced my work on many different levels. For example the uniqueness of Thriller in it's time broke the conventional way of doing music videos. It combined two genres in one and added a level of complexity to music videos that was unheard of at that point of time. Captivating innovation and a riveting plot was the formula that caused Thriller to stand out from the monotony. In my study I have also taken notes of their shot composition, camera angles, camera movement and use of light to create depth in the frame and tried to apply some of their techniques in my own music videos. The fact that directors and cinematographers actually use still pictures though it may seem obvious, it was quite eye opening to me and something I have definitely added to my arsenal of thoughts. Two of these videos relied heavily on the use of fog to set the tone and to add a desired aesthetic effect. In my thesis I too relied on the use of fog to diffuse the light, soften my shadows and highlights and adding depth to my shots. One of my favorite quotes is from the great Pablo Picasso which goes as follows "good artist borrow, great artist steal". My process in piecing my thesis project together came from many ideas that I "borrowed" from the music video aforementioned including others. I was inspired by the lighting ideas of Colin Tilley, The camera movement in "False Alarm", the shot composition in "Be Humble" and elements of the story was inspired by

Thriller. I continue to admire the work that I witness and acquire elements of theirs to inspire my work.

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