

## **A BLEND OF SOUND AND IMAGE- THE MUSIC VIDEO**

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**Abstract:** The focus of this paper is first of all the issue of authorship in music videos, with reference to the division of tasks between the musician and the director. Secondly, a non-narrative musical piece is analysed - The Chemical Brothers' *Star Guitar* - in relation to the narrative video created by Michel Gondry to enrich its meanings and better convey the intended message of the musicians.

**Keywords:** *authorship, musical message, video message*

### **1. Introduction**

Literary critical studies have constantly been holding authorship theories under scrutiny, from voices hailing the paramount role an author has to theoretical studies committing the author to invisibility. Roland Barthes boldly denounced the limiting status of the author in the interpretation of a text, stating the necessity of abandoning the creative voice entirely: "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (qtd. in Caughie 1981:213).

Michael Foucault distinguished himself from Barthes by tackling the problem from another angle. By separating the indicative and designative functions of the author's name, he investigated the discourses surrounding and attached to the author's name. Extending his theories of discourses from *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault considered author as a product of discursive practices, instead of a creative subject. "In undertaking an internal and architectonic analysis of a work and in delimiting psychological and biographical references, suspicions arise concerning the absolute nature and creative role of the subject." (qtd. in Caughie 1981:290)

The author of the text may not be obvious especially when dealing with multimedia texts. Today, we commonly recognize the director as the author of a movie. This idea of authorship largely originated, and was promoted, by the influential French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Contributors such as Éric Rohmer, François Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, Luc Moullet and André Bazin wrote influential film critiques on the politics of authorship. Many of these film critics later became filmmakers in the French New Wave, a status that gave them the possibility to experiment their ideas on authorship in their filmic works. Since then, the director has been

inscribed with a paramount role in the production of a movie. John Caughie explained the debate on authorship after the introduction of semiotics and psychoanalysis:

The intervention of semiotics and psychoanalysis into the field of film theory has tended to shatter the unity of the author, scattering fragments over the whole terrain, calling into question the possibility of a theory of the author which is not also a theory of ideologies, of discourses, of commodities and, crucially, of the subject... The author, rather than standing behind the text as a source, becomes a term in the process of reading or spectating" (1981:200).

Janet Staiger turned Judith Butler's studies on speech-act theory into performative statements in filmic works. Through the repetition of speech within the discursive system, the statement itself becomes effective. Directors can make performative statements repeatedly within the production of movies. This is because the role of the director itself requires the director to make authorial decisions: "In films, firms hire directors to make these choices, and the division of labor places them into a work structure with specific authority to make authoring statements" (2003:50). These statements are illustrated through the *mise-en-scène* of a film. If a director can repeatedly make performative statements in his work, then the authorial traces can be identified by critical observation. "What an author *is*, is the repetition of statements" (2003:51).

David Bordwell also illustrated how this attention to style was pioneered in the works of Andrew Sarris: "One useful way to sharpen the critic's sense of stylistic difference is to find a common problem that two directors solve in different ways... Craft conditions create shared problems; directorial personalities solve them in ways that reveal subtle difference of purpose and attitude" (Tybjerg 60 qting. Bordwell 2001:171). By combining Staiger and Sarris' ideas, authorship can be identified as various directors' method of solving the same problem through the practice of repetitive statements, which also allows them to distinguish themselves from their peers.

## **2. Who Makes the Music Videos?**

Since all music videos are made upon a preexisting song, does this mean the musician would have the authorial power in videos? In the essay "Authorship and Point-of-View Issues in Music Video", Gary Burns argues that music video is generally a director's medium, instead of a musician's medium. In a music video production, musicians and record companies might have certain visual imagery or concepts, however they usually do not have the ability to turn those concepts into a music video. Even though there are some versatile artists who are able to create in both audio and visual medium, most musicians do not know how to make videos (Burns 1990:175).

This is also a practical problem of division of labour. Musicians can focus on their musical work while other artists, such as graphic designers and music videos directors, can worry about the artworks in other medium (e.g. CD cover and music videos). To support his argument of treating music video as a director's medium, Burns observed that "relatively few musicians seem to have

much interest in their video beyond a general concern with image” (1990:176) and for some musicians, they even turn themselves away from videos. During the time Burns published his article, it was true that some musicians, as well as fans, disliked the use of music videos. Throughout the early and mid 80s, some die-hard rock fans considered music video as an “intrusion upon the authenticity of the musical experience and the authority of the musicians” (Cook 1998:129). Yet, this argument is less applicable to today’s music scene, as no popular musician can turn him/herself away from music videos. Unfortunately, music videos are often of a higher quality than the song they are meant to support, with audiences remembering the former rather than the latter.

Although musicians might be more aware of the significance of music videos, only a handful of musicians have turned into music videos directors. It is more common for musicians to expand their roles vertically, acting as the composer, producer and singer at the same time. Similarly in the film industry, screenwriters and actors are more likely to expand their roles vertically to become directors, with models like Charlie Chaplin, Woody Allen, Clint Eastwood or Mel Gibson. This is because artists can gain greater creative freedom in their corresponding mediums by expanding their roles vertically. It is much harder to find examples of musicians turning into directors and vice versa, as expanding roles horizontally would be an attempt in an entirely different medium.

Musicians cannot expand their freedom in musical creation by turning into music video directors that easily. Even for a musician with such a strong visual persona, Lady Gaga has been unable to obtain (complete) authority in her music videos due to her role as musician. In the “Born This Way” video, Lady Gaga used photographer Nick Knight as the director. Even though Gaga was generally satisfied with the result, there were moments where Gaga and her creative partner, choreographer Laurieann Gibson, felt their ideas were not executed as desired (Bangs, Gondry 2003).. Hence, in the following video for the song “Judas”, Lady Gaga and Gibson decided to direct the music video by themselves.

If musicians want to obtain authority in the making of music videos they must acquire the role of the director. With generally smaller budgets in music video, directors are required to be involved in more aspects of the productions. They are also encouraged to experiment with techniques and styles because the financial risk is lower. This nature of production has granted them greater freedom and authority in the production. Hence, it is actually easier for directors to make repetitive performative statements in music video than in movies. In terms of ascribing authorship, the evidence showing music video as a director’s medium is much stronger than as a musician’s medium.

Since promoting the “Behind-the-scene” personnel would not increase the sales of records, there is no need to identify the director, or anyone other than the musicians (Burns 1990:175). Similarly, in terms of advertising function, any mention of the director is considered as useless information and hence discarded in the promoting the video.

Discarding of the director is by no means a major drawback in studying authorship in music videos. As the name of the directors are not shown in the videos, only the industry insiders can know who directed which video.

It is true that with the birth of online encyclopedia one can easily obtain a complete list of works from any director and watch the video from video sharing websites such as [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com) and [vimeo.com](https://www.vimeo.com).

### **3. Michel Gondry – A Narrative Video for a Non-Narrative Song**

Since music video is a director's medium, if one is going to study authorship, one has to turn to the work of a particular director. To name a few, David Fincher, Jonathan Glazer, Michael Bay, Anton Corbijn, Michel Gondry and Spike Jonze are some of the well-known music video directors who directed feature films in the later part of their careers and are best known for these.

Michel Gondry's music videos combine visual effects and mise-en-scène and twist them into dreamy worlds. Early trademarks of his style are apparent in his early work for his band, *Oui Oui*, as well as in his frequent collaborations with the singer Björk.<sup>5</sup> After making an abundant amount of music videos and commercials, Gondry gave vent to his creativity in feature films, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) being a well-known movie with a strong critical and commercial impact.

Direct links between music and image are created not only showing the layer where music and images are in synch, but also suggesting new meanings acquired in the process. Gondry has shaped a new audiovisual relationship within the gap of visual and audio contents, which would serve as evidence of how music videos obtain their autonomy from the pre-existing music.

Such a technique is employed by many other musicians who produce electronic music, such as Fatboy Slim, The Chemical Brothers and Aphex Twin. Different from popular artists in other genres, musicians who produce electronic music rarely appear in music videos. This is because techno music producers do not have a technique to perform visually. Their talents lie in the selection of beats, mixing, and sampling of music instead of playing instruments. The process of producing music cannot provide similar visual excitement as playing a guitar or singing a song.

As a general rule, music videos do not embody traditional narratives. Unlike movies, the role of music in music videos is different:

If the intent of music-video imagery lies in drawing attention to the music... it makes sense that the image ought not to carry a story or plot in the way a feature film might. Otherwise, video-makers would run the risk of our being so engaged with the actions of the characters or so concerned with impending events that we would be pulled outside the realm of the video and become involved with other narrative possibility (Vernallis 2004:17).

Walter Ong once argued, "Sight isolates, sound incorporates. Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer" (qtd. in Vernallis 2004:175). Unlike watching a film, where we can focus on an external screen, we listen to music in a more

indulging way. “Phenomenologists have claimed that one of the unique properties of music and the listener is the way that the listener and music become intertwined” (Vernallis 2004:111) The inability to separate ourselves from music makes us treat the act of listening to music as an internal experience, while watching a film an external experience.

Michel Gondry extended the concept of responsive imagery to the French countryside in the video of “Star Guitar”. Working with an ambient electronic mix from The Chemical Brothers, Gondry composed another sensory symphony with a subtle tone. The objective view of a train passenger becomes a subjective musical journey, which takes audiences to a dreamy experience of hyper-reality.

### **3.1. *The Chemical Brothers* – the Band, the Style**

Formed in 1991, The Chemical Brothers band are the electronic music duo that pioneered the music style called “big beat”. The band consists of Ed Simon and Tom Rowlands, who met in a history course when the two were studying in Manchester University. Their use of heavy synthesizer and break beats have inspired other big beat musicians such as Fatboy Slim, The Prodigy and The Crystal Method. Similar to other electronic artists in the same era, The Chemical Brothers rarely appear in their music videos. If they are appearing in videos, they often only make cameo appearances, such as being the truck drivers in “The Boxer” or as computer wallpaper in “Believe”. There is greater room for different music video directors to fabricate ideas with their music producing innovative music videos such as “Hey Boy, Hey Girl”, “Salmon Dance” and “Galvanize”.

### **3.2. *Star Guitar* - the Song**

In their first collaboration on “Let Forever Be”, Gondry and The Chemical Brothers left their audiences in awe with groundbreaking visual effects in combining dream and reality. The video attracted media attention and is often considered as one of the best music videos of The Chemical Brothers. Gondry presented a seemingly natural, calm scenery to audiences. The song is sampled from an acoustic guitar melody from David Bowie’s song “Starman” hence its title “Star Guitar”. By slowing down the pace and using the synthesizer heavily “Star Guitar” becomes an instrumental number which provides a hazy, pacifying feeling to audiences.

To describe the music video in short, it is a showcase of the countryside and suburban sceneries on a train ride, backed by the music from The Chemical Brothers. There is no narrative, character or dancing in the video. Every object exists in the video for a very short spell, on and off the screen within a few seconds. If audiences watch the music video on mute, they can easily consider the video as unedited footage of a train ride. In order to analyse this music video, the nature of the song will first be illustrated.

The pace of the song is steady and melodies are often alternating between crescendo and decrescendo. Besides the bridge section where the vocal is introduced, audiences can hardly notice the changes in music sections. The window scenery of an ordinary train ride is what Gondry employs in order to represent this spacious and relaxing feeling of the music.

“The types of shots used in videos do not just reflect sonic processes, but they also suggest a listening subject as much as a viewing one... The camera’s perspective often suffices to imply a listening subject” (Vernallis 2004:44) Although there is no narrative to explain the listening subject, audiences can interpret the subject from visual cues. The scenery on the screen is moving from right to left at a constant speed and a railway is visible for most of the video. Towards the end of the video, reflections of the train interior can be seen, which further confirm the listening subject as a train passenger. The peaceful listening experience resonates with the spacious sceneries of countryside, oil factory, suburban neighbourhood and river:

Gondry merges the sensation of spectatorship in both forms within a television context with *Star Guitar*, offering a variation of the ‘music/movement experience’ in the suggestion that the viewer is on the train listening to the Chemical Brothers song on a set of headphones (Fidler 2007:256).

With this soothing overall atmosphere, discovering the repetitive rhythmic audiovisual relationship is trickier. The static objects in “*Star Guitar*” reflect the beats of the music directly. The elements in the landscape, such as electric poles, oil storage tanks, chimneys, houses, oil trains and bridges, are all organized to match the beats of certain instruments in the song. For example, the appearance of the electric poles and huts matches the sound of the bass drum; the appearance of each person in the train station matches the singing of each word.

These audiovisual relationships are not obvious because the camera does not focus on any individual object. However, once the audience has discovered one clue of connection between music and image on the screen, they will start looking for more linkages between the two. The revelation of hidden linkages provides a pleasurable experience to the audience. As a result, the audience will be encouraged to watch the video again and again in order to reveal more connections between the two.

As the music video cinematographer Daniel Pearl has pointed out,

Videos have to be very complex in structure, because the average viewer sees them 20, 30, 40 or more times. We look for ways to photograph the unphotographable and hold onto the attention of our audience, not for just one viewing of a video, but repetitive viewing of the same video (2004:26).

The subtle linking of image to music encourages audiences to watch the music video repeatedly. Besides the direct rhythmic relationship between the visual and audio experience, the video creates a new meaning on another level. From the first glance of the video, audiences will recognize the video content as the footage of a ‘real’ train ride. However, during the course of watching the video they will start to notice the peculiarities in it. From 3:05 to 3:09, a series of small huts appear at the side of the railway which is unusually packed. Another example would be in the river section (2:29-2:53) where the same bridge appears on the screen every two seconds. These peculiar spots would have been rare, if not impossible, in real life sceneries. Due

to these peculiarities, audiences are forced to question the authenticity of this footage of the train ride.

The two lines that make up the lyrics in the song give further hints that the seemingly 'real' sceneries can be influenced or altered.

"You should feel what I feel  
You should take what I take"

With their strong connections with the rave party scene, The Chemical Brothers play a style of music often interpreted as being related to the use of psychedelic drugs. Many would interpret the above lyrics as a persuasion of drug taking. Yet, these two lines are actually equivocal and could be taken as a metaphorical reference to music instead of drugs. To The Chemical Brothers, music is exactly the reason why they do not need drugs. Tom Rowland has explained in an interview, "Music is the thing for me. It's almost like making music so people don't have to take drugs... I love it when people say, 'Wow, that made me feel like I was out of my mind and I wasn't on anything.'" They would like their music to become a substitute for drugs, which can influence people and provide psychedelic feelings. By using the terminologies like "feel" and "take", The Chemical Brothers relate attributes of drugs and music. Music becomes something that one can "take" and produce psychedelic effects. This idea is echoed in the video as well.

Under the influence of drugs, our perceptions of reality are distorted. Similarly, the reality in the video is distorted under the influence of music. When audiences realize the connections between the image and music they will also realize that they are watching a manipulated reality. This realization has provided extra complexity to the structure of video. Essentially, watching "Star Guitar" video is an experience of hyperreality and the realization of it.

To begin with, Gondry listened to the song sections repeatedly and turned them into to a musical score. He noted the beats of each instrument on graph paper with great precision. Unlike the common staff notation that "specifies in exhaustive detail what might be termed the digital aspects of pitch and rhythm" (Cook 268), he noted the rhythm and volume, but omitted the pitch. Gondry has put the emphasis of the video upon characteristics like repetitions and magnitude, at the expense of other characters like pitches. The resulting 'natural' train ride is a product of computer graphics. Gondry took the train between Nîmes and Valence ten times and filmed the sceneries with a DV camera. His brother, Oliver Gondry, then used the resulting footage to recreate the sceneries according to the musical score. The result is an arbitrary representation of an ideal train ride instead of a reference to real life experience.

The comfortable, pleasant trade ride, which serves as an ideal environment for experiencing the song, is later discovered as a human manipulation. This hyperreal nature of the video does not reduce any real impact to the audiences. The revelation provokes real feelings and raises real questions. It allows audiences to question their seemingly objective view of the external world, the influential nature of music and the intricate interactions between music and their perceptions.

#### **4. Conclusion**

M. Gondry turned an ordinary train ride into a musical journey. He masked the connections between the visual and audio experience with the mundane scenery of the French countryside. Instead of passively watching a music video, audiences are invited to participate in this game he designed. By repeated viewings, audiences can discover the relationships between audio and visual imagery and interpret their discoveries.

The video becomes a direct response to the musical contents. Gondry highlights the musicality of visual cues and alters our listening experience. Instead of listening to the song as a complete, intact soundscape, the patterns, structures, and even interactions of different instruments can be discovered. This direct response on screen also leaves a trail for the sound, which inverts the roles of sight and sound. The corresponding objects remain on the screen even after the sound has faded away. With prolonged visual impact, the effect of music can be enriched. At first sight, the visual imageries parallels the musical arrangements. In the underlying level, new meanings are created through the complementary nature of the two media. Our perception of music has undoubtedly been altered and enriched by the power of music videos to such an extent that further critical insight is needed on how and why music videos are made.

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