

THE DIY MEANING KIT: THE CHANGING
NATURE OF MUSIC VIDEO ANALYSIS

By

HEATH KERR HIGNIGHT

Bachelor of Arts

Oklahoma State University

Stillwater, Oklahoma

1995

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
July, 1998

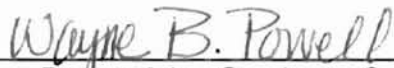
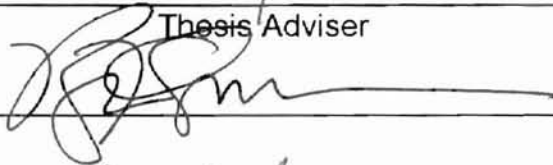
OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

THE DIY MEANING KIT: THE CHANGING
NATURE OF MUSIC VIDEO ANALYSIS

Thesis Approved:



Thesis Adviser



Dean of the Graduate College

PREFACE

This article has been on my mind and work schedule for over a year, and there are many individuals who have helped me to take it from the former to the latter. First kudos go to the Oklahoma State University English department, which, under the leadership of Dr. Jeffrey Walker, has consistently promoted the free exchange of ideas (both traditional and radical) that made this project possible. Dr. Edward Walkiewicz waded through first drafts of this project, challenging and enhancing my understanding of postmodern theory at every turn. I also owe a great debt to many musical artists who, through hours of phone interviews, helped me to frame my ideas about the significance of sampling as it relates to popular culture. Specifically, I thank Jonathan Moore and Matt Black of Coldcut for their insightful analysis of music video as it stands today, and look forward to their continued success in promoting the cause of independent music video-making. Finally, I would like to thank my thesis committee members: Dr. Edward Jones, for consistently pushing me to turn out a clean and clear product; Dr. Leonard Leff, who can pack two weeks of things for me to ponder into one short phrase; and Dr. Brian Evenson, for the many conversations on popular (and not so popular) music that helped me to develop this project from a whim to a proper paper.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION: THE HISTORY OF MUSIC VIDEO ANALYSIS.....	1
II. THE PROBLEMS OF POSTMODERNIST APPROACHES TO MUSIC VIDEO ANALYSIS.....	6
III. THE CHANGING NATURE OF MUSIC VIDEO ANALYSIS.....	30
IV. NOTES.....	51
V. BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	54

I. INTRODUCTION: THE HISTORY OF MUSIC VIDEO ANALYSIS

Almost anyone who glanced at the cover of *Spin* magazine's August 1997 issue likely noticed the usual fare: coverage of governmental infringement on personal rights ("NYPD Black and Blue: The Alarming Rise in Police Brutality"); an invitation to a counter-cultural pocket ("The Wide, Weird World of Magic: The Gathering"); and a list of featured bands and albums. All of this surrounds the shockingly sexual vinyl-clad neo-folksinger Ani DiFranco staring brashly back from the newsstand as "Rock's Most Unlikely Superstar" topped by a motley of green and blue hair reminiscent of early 1970s shag carpet. Across the top, however, *Spin* had co-opted that classic trope of television journalism, the "Special Report," drawing attention to what many would consider a topic hardly worthy of a high profile style magazine: "Why Music Videos Suck." In a time when music journalism seems so clearly controlled by the media giants of America's two coasts, why *Spin* would worry its audience with a revelatory look at the qualitative decline of MTV and music video remains a mystery. Why would it matter if videos sucked? MTV airs on every continent but Antarctica and continues to spread its waves over an ever-increasing area. The artistic format upon which it is based has become as standard to the process of making a record as writing the songs themselves. What's the point in even criticizing MTV, and more importantly, music video?

The answer to this lies, remarkably enough, all around us. Many movies today no longer contain a traditionally orchestrated soundtrack in the vein of Henry Mancini, Miklos Rozsa, or John Williams; they consist of trendy pop songs that run the gamut of popular musical tastes, arranged in a please-all-constituents format mimicking first generation MTV broadcasting strategies. The average television commercial, instead of presenting a vignette that casually casts a new soft drink as the solution to the age-old problem of human thirst, now often uses bastardized versions of famous songs backed by rapidly cut images that mirror standard music video editing techniques. Youths seen one week in a clothing store with a head full of faux dreadlocks might appear the next week with the same green and blue strands Ani DiFranco debuted on a video released just a few days prior to the *Spin* photo shoot. Since MTV aired its first video, the Buggles' "Video Killed the Radio Star," at 12:01 A.M. August 1, 1981, music video has evolved from a minor record industry promotional tool to a primary cultural and commercial staple.¹ Lately, though, MTV and music video have come under fire for focusing more on, in MTV President Judy McGrath's own words, "politics and culture and fashion," where the act of making and playing inventive videos has nearly ceased altogether (Deickmann 72). *Spin*'s Katherine Deickmann, in titling her quasi-expose "Video Killed the Video Star," insightfully suggests that while music video and MTV may have changed the music, fashion, advertising and film industries forever, the power of music videos, and their primary delivery medium of MTV, suffer from an acute self-fetishization stemming from the nature of their construction and

evolution as commodified art. Because MTV is a *business*, the financial bottom line will occasionally dictate the absurd bedfellowing of alternative music videos and teen lifestyle shows with a conservative sponsor such as the U.S. Army, who advertised for a week in March, 1997. Because music video arose as a secondary platform for artist promotion, brokering the unique image of artists to accentuate the sales potential of albums and singles, it cannot ever escape the domineering influence of economic concerns.

Many artists today, however, are tackling the constriction long perceived to be inherent to the music video format. Having grown up with music video, these artists seek to free the medium from the ties of commerce, wresting the act of making music video from the hands of the major corporations and the production firms which produce the vast majority of music videos. With the advent of affordable audio sampling machines (samplers) in the early 1980s, many artists found that capturing the sound of another recording and editing, reorganizing, flanging, "looping," or otherwise manipulating the sound allowed them to create new musical ideas without the tremendous cost of conventional music production activities. An inventive home music maker could "borrow" a sound costing tens of thousands of dollars for the original recording artist to produce, and use that sound in a refreshing way, perhaps increasing the tempo or adding an echo effect to the sample which would make the new recording more aesthetically pleasing to the home music maker and her/his fans.

Predictably enough, music video production which also employed sampling was not far behind. In 1992, Joshua Pearson,

Gardner Post and Ron O'Donnell, under the name Emergency Broadcast Network, released their first musical work, titled *Commercial Entertainment Product*, to favorable reviews. What made EBN unique wasn't its music, which quickly garnered the already well-worn tags of "hip-hop" and "dance music;" it was the fact that their debut appeared in the form of a VHS video cassette first, with compact disc and audio cassette following the initial release. EBN had taken music video production to a new level, making the viewing of the music video in conjunction with the song the intended way of experiencing the group's artistic output. Using video sampling techniques they pioneered in the wake of audio sampling's rapid spread throughout the musical community, EBN constructed a set of eleven songs through simultaneous audio-visual sampling that altered the codependent nature of previous music video production practices. Essentially, *Commercial Entertainment Product* challenged the notion that music video could not exist as an art form by investing commerce-spawned media materials with an air of, ironically enough, originality.

Since the appearance of *Commercial Entertainment Product*, a number of artists have joined EBN in rewriting the theoretical space occupied by the music video format. With the elevation of the disc jockey (DJ) from the role of club technician to artist in the 1980s and 1990s,² remixing original music to produce alternate versions of songs has brought artists formerly dedicated to music into the realm of video production, which, in turn, has influenced the dialogue concerning the aesthetic nature of music video and its significance to contemporary culture. Thanks to the work of artists such as Coldcut, Eboman, and

Protean Vision Quest, a new school of thought has entered the discourse surrounding modern media, which appears to be changing more than just the way music videos are made. These artists support a line of logic that takes issue with not only the financial considerations presumed to be absolute in the music video format, but also with many premises held by conventional cultural critics about how music videos convey meaning and significance; these artists engage in cultural recycling via simultaneous audio-visual sampling of old television and film works to create entirely “new” works of art that no longer reside solely within the realm of commodified art despite their blatant (re)use of such material. This study addresses these issues by analyzing videos constructed through simultaneous audio-visual sampling, exploring the theoretical and practical ramifications of such modes of artistic production as they rewrite the way in which we approach the act of critical interpretation in this, the new and often complicated age of digital reproduction and artistic creation.³

II. THE PROBLEMS OF POSTMODERNIST APPROACHES TO MUSIC VIDEO ANALYSIS

Although music video has existed as an established medium for only seventeen years,⁴ its critical heritage shares in the long lineage of both film and television studies for the rather obvious reason that music video comes to us through either a television or motion picture screen. It is within the theoretical guideposts of these two complementary but often divergent discourses that music video studies have taken shape, and it is through exploring the nature of music video criticism's development that its present limitations become evident. Because music video is neither wholly televisual nor filmic, but a medium with its own unique tendencies that incorporate both media into rhythmic parameters, a new way of interpreting or approaching music video becomes quite fruitful when attempting to understand recent trends not only in music video, but in television, film, and popular culture as a whole.

In 1987, E. Ann Kaplan began laying the groundwork for the scholarly study of music video with her book, *Rocking Around the Clock*, immediately submerging the previously-ignored medium into the depths of a critical heritage that has dominated the last thirty years of artistic interpretation and conjecture. She delineates the string of postmodern theory devoted to film and televisual media, charting the

role of music video within the specific construct of the twenty-four hour Music Television channel (MTV) as essentially postmodern, in that music videos engage in the classical postmodern practices of textual parody, self-reflexivity, and self-awareness.⁵

Kaplan constructs a series of categories for the music videos of the time which, interestingly enough, remain quite useful over ten years later.⁶ First is the “romantic” music video, in which the narrative structure of the lyrics translates into a visual rendering of “the emotions of loss or reunion” that characterize much pop/rock music today (59). The “classical” form also invokes traditional film narrative structures, but with a closer eye on the “Hollywood ‘male’ gaze toward female figures” and attention to genre traits (61). “Nihilistic” videos, however, depart from these trends; rapid-fire images of the band and their live performances foreground the “anarchic positions” of non-mainstream musical genres such as punk, new wave, and heavy metal (60). The “socially conscious” video espouses the “anti-parental, anti-authority” themes of 1960s political activism, carrying on the radical tradition of rock music’s genesis (67). Finally, the “postmodern” video refuses “to take a clear position vis-à-vis its images,...hedging along the line of not communicating a clear signified”(63). Even as artists formerly not granted a place on MTV gain a larger share of its remaining video broadcast time, their contributions more or less fall easily into one of these categories.⁷ Thus, while admittedly a bit dated in its subject material, Kaplan’s work sets a foundation for the study of music video, creating an engaging and effective critical template.

Kaplan’s work looks primarily to the filmic end of the postmodern

critical approach. As might be expected of someone exploring an uncharted critical domain, she relies heavily upon the most dominant names in postmodern criticism, such as Lacan, Lyotard, Barthes, Derrida, Jameson and others. Thus, we must investigate a few of the elements that define postmodern theory to understand the current state of music video criticism, then locate the elements of postmodern theory that continue to engage music video effectively while revising or discarding those which, for one reason or another, have begun to cloud the medium's scholarship as the medium itself evolves.

Defining the postmodern in theoretical approaches to film and televisual analysis (and music video, for that matter) requires an investigation of Fredric Jameson, the well-known Marxist critic. Jameson, who has illustrated the numerous ways in which "classic" postmodernism appears to engender problems in a Godelian fashion, takes up the gauntlet thrown down by Walter Benjamin, challenging his suggestion that film, a product of process reproduction, is by its nature detached from the "domain of tradition" that operates in other media. With an eye towards historical consciousness, Jameson demonstrates the medium's ability to convey specific cultural information despite Benjamin's claim that film "substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence," creating for itself a new domain through the act of being viewed (221). More than any other theorist of late, Jameson systematically provides the space necessary for the critic to continue functioning in a world that has been exposed to the inherent chaotic tendencies of postmodernist dogma; according to Brom Anderson, he "gives professors some reason for reading

literature and a way of doing it" (123).

Jameson uses as his guideposts for cultural analysis three premises that illustrate the postmodern problem as it relates to visual motion arts such as film, television and music video. The first, the political unconscious, suggests that "every text is at its most fundamental level a political fantasy" which, in this late capitalist world, "articulates both the actual and potential social relations which constitute individuals within a specific political economy" (MacCabe xi).⁸ Each text, like each author, possesses a political agenda of which it is unaware, and the presence of this agenda ipso facto counters the decentering tendencies of postmodernity.

This would certainly seem to be the case with much music video; any number of videos from MTV's past espouse a narrative that unifies sound and image, as suggested by Kaplan's easy classification of videos throughout her book. Even today, many music videos consistently portray characters who develop relationships between one another as a reflection of the lyrics and rhythmic shifts that take place in the song. Smashmouth's early 1998 video, a re-recording of War's 1975 single, "Why Can't We Be Friends," shows band members engaging in dance numbers that mimic the pacifist lyrics of the song. At one point, lead singer Steve Hartwell chants, "The color, the color, the color of your skin don't matter to me/as long as, as long as, as long as we can live in harmony," as a white police officer beats a black street youth against a patrol car, only to have Hartwell tap them on their shoulders to make them dance together in time to the music. Charged on many different levels, this example, typical of many

throughout the history of music video, illustrates clearly the political unconscious of which Jameson speaks, where Smashmouth's agenda of promoting peaceful coexistence becomes the unifying element behind the lyrics and the images.

The second premise is a definition of postmodernism, one which is not concerned with content as are so many others, but with the assumption that art has fully entered "into the world of commodity production," having become open to, developed out of, and constrained by the "possibility of a cultural politics which would fundamentally intervene in the economic" (MacCabe xii-xiii). Because visual motion art is produced (and reproduced) mechanically, it can appear (and reappear) quickly at the whim of audience desire. The substantial investment involved in making even the smallest or most specialized subject-focused film for public presentation a financial success (the only kind of success in Jamesonian late-capitalistic terms) thus dictates that the aesthetic concerns of a product will take a subordinate position; Kevin Costner's filmic fiasco *Waterworld* may be visually striking, but audiences know not to expect another expensive, futuristic ocean film because of *Waterworld*'s dismal financial problems. It is because of this condition that visual motion art has decidedly moved away from the Modern in recent decades, away from the impulse "to invent forms...(that) project an interiority onto a future unmediated by any form of commodity" (MacCabe xii). Smashmouth's "Why Can't We Be Friends" bears this element out. Just as the west-coast "ska" style of pop music reflects what's "hot" or selling best at the beginning of 1998, so too does the visual content cater to the

fetishization of popular pacifism; it is also politically correct in 1998 to alleviate racial tension through an activity such as dancing that unites disparate parties such as white police officers and black youths. This video, as Jamesonian analysis suggests, breaks no new ground, but instead submits to the prevailing economic winds of the day, soon to be changed as the value of that political commodity shifts.

Finally, cognitive mapping, "a way of understanding how the individual's representation of his or her social world...the individual's successful negotiation of urban space," is the element that unifies the first two assumptions (MacCabe xiv). Cognitive mapping describes how the decentered individual in the audience, aware of the political unconscious agenda of each work of art, negotiates the economic positions taken by that work of art in relation to his/her own economic position, enabling the individual to "articulate the local and the global" and thus make cultural sense of the work (MacCabe xiv). Thus the postmodern may, in fact, consist of many different elements seemingly collected together with little or no apparent unifying or totalizing element, but these elements possess unique referential qualities that "release as many alternate histories," all known and understood, which are cognitively mapped into coherence by the audience (Jameson, *Geopolitical* 19). Indeed, Jameson claims that our subconscious resolution of television's dislocated "vivid miseries" of contemporary life, "which offer the example of an idea that includes an image, or an image that comes pre-packaged," takes place "all the time" (Jameson, *Geopolitical* 2). As such, visual motion art which appears to be postmodern ultimately can be negotiated by the culturally deft Marxist

critic. To close our discussion of Jameson, and of Smashmouth's video, we may search the iconography of the set designs, as well as the cumulative effect of the video's narrative, to map cognitively the space the video occupies in cultural studies. An attentive eye will quickly note certain elements of 1950s American popular culture in the video: Corbusier-influenced fixtures dot the diner in which the video begins; the band travels from location to location in an early 1950s Chevrolet half-ton flat bed truck; band members and extras sport clothing and hair styles reminiscent of popular television shows in the Eisenhower era; and the gratuitous dance scenes evoke Stanley Donen-directed musicals like *Singing in the Rain* (1952) or *Damn Yankees* (1958). For anyone familiar with that period of American culture, cognitively placing "Why Can't We Be Friends" within a framework that explicates 1950s American imperialist tendencies in the light of late 1990s-styled political correctness is no difficult task.

By engaging in such critical maneuvering, however, we affect the space of the original work of art. As we comment upon a film, television or music video performance, we contribute a body of information and opinion to it that is, to varying degrees, inseparable from the domain of the work as we perceive it in our minds, which quickly and imperfectly finds its way into our memory. If we think about the act of interpreting a work of visual motion art, the composition of the memory we have of that work comes to us in the act of criticism just as Jameson says: alternate histories of our thoughts on the work *in addition to* the memory of the work as a discrete object in itself. We cannot discuss the film later in a restaurant without reflecting upon our

reactions to its emotive power as they came to us; we merge those thoughts into the fabric of the film's memory, at once altering the space of the film as a work of art we have experienced. Each subsequent time we attend a screening of the same film, we continue to add critical material to it, noting set design in one viewing and acting or lighting techniques in another, heirarchizing the elements we like in each screening into the actual film itself. For example, after reading the above interpretation of Smashmouth's video, viewers would find it quite difficult *not* to go in search of other 1950s American cultural tags upon watching the video a second or third time, where more and more vague or ambiguous connections might be made, for instance, between the camera movements used in the video and those used in *The Pajama Game* (1957). This is not to say that all viewers, once exposed to a critical idea or interpretation, automatically incorporate that into their own interpretations of the work of art, but rather that, once the interpretive idea enters the mind of the viewer, it also enters the objective space of the work as it exists in the viewer's memory. Thus, if we think about the act of interpreting a text such as a music video, we cannot exclude the importance of memory in understanding the process. In this respect, Jameson advances visual motion art studies beyond the initial work of Benjamin; however, to say that the actual music video itself contains these things, these signifying elements, is to go one step too far.

Remote from the act of creating and producing art, the critical project as such takes a high-handed approach to reading the textual fabric of artwork, a problem that at present limits our understanding of

the music video format. Tucked away in the comfort of a well-padded chair and a fist full of hard-earned degrees, many cultural critics like Jameson who ultimately rely upon the principles of reader-response theory come to the task of interpreting art as though art occupied a discrete space separate from the swirling mass of physical and emotional influences better known as reality. Without regard for the integrity of the work of art, this critical approach invades the space the work occupies in the viewer's mind to cast upon it the various cloaks of specialized interpretations that, when read, alter the way in which we are subsequently allowed to perceive the original. It is easy for critics to place themselves in that discreet space and theorize about the practical nature of their artistic analysis, but that doesn't always render a realistic, if even palpable, critical stance that can exist just as convincingly or authoritatively outside the fabricated discrete space. Seeing the dirt and scum of contemporary art production, the residual traces of environmental influence that reside within the domain of a work of art, from such a sanitizing distance as TV, a traditional cultural critic might deduce that we can actually experience artworks in the media of film, television, and music video through the omnipotent lens of theory.

Yet we know we cannot. Just as we can predict that numerous characters will step in dog droppings in Robert Altman's *Pret a Porter* (1994) and acknowledge grudgingly the necessary chaos of such events in everyday life, we must accept that art cannot be thoroughly understood or even experienced outside of the environment that contributed to its development before embarking upon critical

endeavors. Viewing a film from the 1940s, such as Hitchcock's rendering of Steinbeck's morality tale *Lifeboat* (1943), may provide a cursory level of entertainment or philosophy for the contemporary viewer, but beyond this, we must investigate the strenuous studio and directorial conditions that produced the film, the socio-political atmosphere of the 1940s upon which it commented, and the public's response to understand the film's full significance as a work of art within the fabric of human experience.

Perhaps this is a presumption needing clarification. Art as we are willing to generally define it requires a viewer or listener. While this may seem akin to what reader-response proponent Stanley Fish calls an "unassailable" yet impractical tendency towards relativism (319), the fact remains that for people to talk about art, they must experience it in some way. Thus, for the critical project to exist, we must enter the space of art, meeting the film on its own terms by delving into the material that made it what it is. The philosophy underlying Jamesonian analysis, however, does not allow the individual to do this without necessarily altering the original. In his endeavor to impart some sort of concrete meaning in a modernist, if not wholly romantic, impulse, Jameson collapses the viewer's job of creating meaning from signified elements in a text into an inherent feature of the text itself; "his analysis is sometimes marred by the fact that he is moving from the concrete to the abstract," where the function of the viewer which is essential to our understanding of art is co-opted into a presumed inalienable quality of the work of art (Anderson 116). Were Jameson to acknowledge that his method of interpretation both stems from *and* remains valid for only

himself, then it would be acceptable; however, his method of analysis purports to describe a commonly experienced cultural condition simply from the materials of the work of art, as though the work of art imparted to its viewers the actual memory of which he speaks. This is something that cannot be taken for granted, for as much as we may wish to believe a work of art such as a film or music video contains anthropomorphic tendencies, it remains just that: a wish.

Also at issue in the Jamesonian line of logic regarding new developments in music video is the conceptualization of the simulacrum or recycled image as depthless or valueless when compared to the three dimensionality of the original. Jean Baudrillard, who initiated this thorny area of cultural conceptualization, suggests that the act of reusing imagery, as EBN and Coldcut do, "threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false,' between 'real' and 'imaginary'" (344). Tony Wilson further describes the simulacrum as "derealized" or lacking the density filled out by a "determinate identity" insofar as the viewer cannot root the recycled image within the construct of reality (392). Wilson uses as an example a television show in which the male main character, romantically pursuing an elusive woman, becomes confused as to the woman's true identity upon learning that he may have not chased the woman, but her identical twin sister; a "horizon of uncertainty and ambiguity...characterizes (the protagonist's) experience, the woman standing before him...reduced from a three-dimensional being" (Wilson 392). That such a condition in and of itself could be characterized as two-dimensional seems somewhat absurd in light of the "cat paradox" postulated by Erwin Schroedinger, in which

the Austrian physicist hypothesized the dual existence of opposed realities created by a similar condition of uncertainty in the observer. A cat placed in an opaque box containing a killing mechanism activated by isotopic decay creates for the observer the simultaneous existence of both a dead and living cat at any time prior to actually looking in the box.⁹ It would be hard to characterize this (and Wilson's) dual reality as simply two-dimensional in any sense of the definition; there is not one determinate identity but two, the observer's condition being that s/he must actively maintain, define and characterize the image, be it in the mind or on the screen, as two "real" entities which both possess through this lack of singular determinacy a three-dimensional character. Wilson more or less iterates these same politics, noting that "we have the same evidence for an existing three-dimensional world as for the two-dimensional image; both can feature as the content of perception," choosing to manipulate the logic statement so that three-dimensionality precedes perception according to his Jamesonian agenda (403). This seems to be, however, a matter of *linguistic* difference rooted in the pseudo-reasoning tactic of begging the question: does reality as a three-dimensional construct exist independent of our senses because our senses tell us that this is the case, even when that reality appears in the unreal world of the television screen? Instead, it would seem that Wilson's two-dimensional image and three-dimensional world rely for first-order validation upon sensation, which in the case of television or film would physically appear on the screen as indistinguishable, regardless of the objective realities within which characters, events, and locations are constructed

by the viewer as being three-dimensional. Whether or not the real exists independent of our senses is not the issue; we experience and validate that real through our senses, and as it pertains to the image on a screen, we can do nothing to validate one as three-dimensional or two-dimensional, but carry both together as a composite reality. Until we learn that one person is the authentic, until we become aware through our senses that the cat is dead, we cannot define the alternate or other as a depthless image; the impact of the theory of the simulacrum, therefore, becomes more of an indulgence of the mind instead of a model for investigating and interpreting work that reuses or recycles imagery such as the music videos made by EBN and Coldcut; for at any level, Baudrillard's approach refuses to acknowledge the difference between the abstract and the concrete, a problem shared by Jameson as well.

Yet another disputed issue is the notion that any one text contains messages or a political agenda which will be understood unequivocally by all who see it. John Fiske attacks Jameson on this issue, rejecting both the assumption that all "capitalist cultural industries...promote the same capitalist ideology" as well as the "consequent belief that any one text conveys the same message to all people" ("TV" 1). Such a romantic and idealized construct of audience ignores the increasingly apparent "alliance of formations" that constitute the contemporary viewing population, "constantly shifting and relatively transient" in a world no longer fractured by distance (Fiske, "TV" 2). One geographic area's reception of television transmissions or access to cinema does not preclude that area's

cultural assimilation into the global media network, for ultimately, the audience still retains the capacity to choose or accept the message in accordance with its particular position; this is especially true in the wake of pay-per-view programming and the spread of video cassette players, both of which place upon the viewer the act of choosing viewing material. Other concerns intervene at various societal, traditional and governmental levels which further hinder the formation of a homogeneously-understood message. In 1993, MTV Asia (one of seven different programming entities bearing the MTV moniker), attempting to remain culturally sensitive, aired *Gone Taiwan* so early in the afternoon only Taiwanese children fresh out of classes could view the show while Indian children, still in school, would not (Banks 100). This may also be a result of a proactive stance on the part of viewing constituents, aimed at "limiting foreign programming because [the indigenous governments] wish to preserve their own culture and do not want to be overwhelmed with American ideas and values inherent in this foreign media content" (Banks 90). Furthermore, the expansion of interactive technology networks, to include cable, satellite and computer systems, has empowered the local as much as it has the Jamesonian political unconscious. Speaking specifically of the postmodern elements of "hip-hop" music, Peter Manuel makes a revealing declaration about the state of contemporary mass media:

Media consumers worldwide are now exposed to a bewildering array of musics from all manner of diverse cultures, subcultures and epochs. Concurrent with this development has been the growth of migrant and diaspora communities, and their own recognition--by themselves, popular culture, and the academy—as significant subcultures in their own right, with their own

art forms, distinct senses of identity, and in some cases economic and political clout. (228)

The exchange of cultural influence seems two-way at its most basic, as capitalist theory of supply and demand might postulate, the supply from hegemonic media sources invariably becoming tailored to individual or local demands for relatively authentic local color and culture. Instead of becoming one monolithic culture, the global community can be more accurately understood to be talking among itself through a shared set of media agencies, which “do affect, but cannot control, local meanings” (Ang 151).

Nonetheless, cognitive mapping is a concept flawed in another, and potentially more revealing, way; if we take cognitive mapping as so defined, all texts become *infinite*. To think this notion through to its logical end is to reveal that cognitive mapping itself fails, for the process that produces the cognitive map destroys it in an, ironically enough, Jamesonian fashion. As noted, the act of cognitive mapping rests in the domain of and depends upon the viewer’s memory of key cultural events, the suggestion being that our experiences of culture develop and exercise the cognitive muscles of the memory, which in turn help us to frame our own space within a real experiential setting more commonly referred to as reality. A viewer’s memory acts as the mechanical device through which art of any and all kinds passes for inspection and labeling, being judged against any number of previously experienced events, art, thoughts or ideas, and emotions. The text being cognitively mapped takes on a definite meaning or position in the

mind of the viewer as a result of garnering a series of tags that refer to the memories of the viewer; for example, the “Jackrabbit Slim’s” dining scene involving Vincent Vega (John Travolta) and Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman) in Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994) may remind a viewer of a dining scene in Milton Krasner’s *Red Line 7000* (1965), the cognitive link being made between the restaurant décor used in each film. One might also be reminded of a visit to Madame Tousseaud’s famous Wax Museum in London when Vincent comments that Jackrabbit Slim’s reminds him of a “wax museum, with a pulse.” The possibilities are endless, as is the potential complexity of cognitive links that could arise as a result of the vastness of a viewer’s experiences throughout her/his life. Any number of slight changes or differences in a viewer’s memory stream could alter the cognitive position the work of art occupies, thus altering its meaning in Jamesonian terms. Keeping in mind that this example consists of only one person, applying the above construct as a paradigm for understanding the madreporic possibilities of *Pulp Fiction* suggests that the text contains, in Jamesonian terms, an infinite number of possible cognitive positions, all dependent upon the particular memory of each viewer. I do not think that Jameson would insist that all viewers share the exact same experiences in their lifetimes, but the very idea of cognitive mapping depends upon just such an assumption. That there exists a limitless number of possible ways to locate cognitively any one text as a result of the fact that every viewer will approach that text with a different set of cognitive “software” disempowers the totalizing tendency of cognitive mapping as a way of defining the meaning of a text. Returning for a brief moment to

Smashmouth's video, "Why Can't We Be Friends," anyone not familiar with the Stanley Donen musicals previously "cognitively mapped" to the video would not necessarily be inclined to view the video as the revision of history Jameson claims it would inherently be, just as someone who knew nothing about Corbusier's influence in architecture and furniture would not be able to make the same deductions about American homogenic cultural tendencies as a filter for understanding the lyrics of the song based solely on the appearance of the furniture in the video. While it would be just as foolish to discount Jameson's analytical objectives wholesale, to assume that no two people could possibly arrive at a similar if not same conclusion about the meaning of a particular film or televisual product, the continually expanding access to humanity's entire back catalogue (and the varying rates at which different parts of the globe gain that access) of visual motion art implicitly suggests that the power of cognitive mapping as a method of consistently and effectively creating meaning dwindles with the rental of every video tape or digital video disc, the switch of every television or satellite channel, and the purchase of every compact disc or cinema ticket.

In his book, *Metamagical Themas*, Douglas Hofstadter suggests a more constructive way of understanding the functional nature of visual motion art as it has developed since the advent of wide-spread reproduction and manipulation processes, an approach that guarantees the separation of text and interpretation that has plagued cultural criticism for years. He proposes, in a chapter titled "Variations on a Theme as the Crux of Creativity," that when artistic, scientific and

philosophical ideas or "concepts" enter the "public domain," they start "migrating and developing in ways that...could never have (been) anticipated" (237). His approach to the idea of creativity and originality as a conditionally quantifiable commodity presupposes that, while any number of changes in an idea spawn numerous distinctly different creative works, a root idea remains central in all of them. This is not to say that the root conveys itself equally throughout each variation of the original idea circulating in the public space, but that, at the level of content, an echo of the original serves to connect the many variations together at a conceptual level despite their outer, or more superficial, differences.

Hofstadter continues along this line of logic, making a claim that appears absurd initially, but under careful scrutiny, provides a fruitful way of investigating and understanding the ramifications of reused sound and imagery in contemporary art works such as music and music video, especially as it relates to the practice of remixing an original idea numerous times to create many "originals." He states that, "*nondeliberate yet nonaccidental slippage permeates our mental processes, and is the very crux of fluid thought*" (Hofstadter 237). In explaining his claim, Hofstadter poses a situation in which, when presented to any number of people, there are any number of possible responses that might arise due to the triggering mechanisms of each individual's mind. Although a group of people may watch the same film in the same theater on the same night, each of them will enter the general conceptual level of the text only to leave it, or react to it, in a slightly different way, forming an evaluation that, while perhaps bearing

some conceptual semblance to others, occupies a critical space distinctly independent of other viewers' critical space. They may concur on what the important elements of the plot or characters are, but each will propose slightly different interpretations regarding the significance of those elements and their general relationship to the concept upon which they all concur. Applying this to musical remixing as a paradigm, an outside creative force, the remixer, enters the text of a song, noting conceptual elements such as rhythm, tempo, instrumentation, and/or sonic balance. The remixer then leaves the text with a sense of those elements in place, but recasts them according to a personal, unique sense of his/her own understanding of what is most resonant, or important, in the original. Although a melody may remain unchanged, an alteration to the rhythmic elements of a song creates a distinctly separate position for the "remix"; despite the link between the general concept, the remix occupies a discreet space apart from the original, thus taking on the weight of originality for itself.

Jameson himself does not care to engage in such discussions in recent work; Colin MacCabe notes that were Jameson so inclined to respond to attacks on his theoretical assumptions such as Fiske's and others he would do so by resorting to the claim that the will to totality is "an inevitable cultural process" (xiv). Douglas Rushkoff, in his analysis of contemporary media trends including MTV, does this for Jameson. Rushkoff contends that while music video may in fact achieve Baudrillard's feared dissolution of TV into life and vice versa, creating a "timeless, imploded dimension," its images still rely upon symbols of

the real through the systematic recycling of seminal or classic film and television images (149). Visual motion arts, and television specifically, have "not doomed (themselves) to utter meaninglessness, but rather given the television medium an unprecedented potential to communicate" through what Rushkoff terms "memetic engineering, in which popular culture mutates through the conscious splicing or recombination of old memes into new ones" which perpetuate the ideas and messages of the original works of art (Rushkoff 148-49). Yet Fiske, seemingly anticipating such a suggestion, sees this splicing and recombination instead as an invitation to "see the text as a do-it-yourself meaning kit" in which different individuals of different backgrounds in different locales will construct their own unique "sense, resisting sense, popular sense, even...non-sense" ("MTV" 74). Derrick De Kerckhove, heir to the McLuhan techno-prophet throne, agrees with this interpretation, suggesting that "we are accelerating towards a new level of consciousness that is both collective and private at once" and which allows for the presentation of the localized as both localized and globalized simultaneously (183). It is thus that the act of choosing, of taking a critical stance, no longer seems like a productive endeavor.

Ultimately, however, the Jamesonian analysis may continue to apply and bear fruit for an as yet undiscussed consideration involving the construction of visual motion art, and more specifically, the very nature of the medium itself. Film and television consist of the use of two modes of communication: visual and aural. Since the beginning of commercial film production, audiences have combined at least two sets of messages (first images and title cards, followed by the addition

of musical accompaniment, and finally the incorporation of the spoken and musical) in experiencing the filmic medium. Despite the film industry's tremendous advances in simultaneously recording the visual and aural and editing them together after the fact, film and television viewers remain aware of the disparity between the two mediums utilized in numerous ways. In early film and television, voices might be too loud at one moment, too soft at the next; the sound of explosions, gunshots and punches might not coincide with the visual action; exterior diegetic sound might consist of one sound, such as the flapping wings in Hitchcock's *The Birds*, despite the visual presence of people engaged in commerce and other activities in Bodega Bay. This noticeable disparity between the messages reaching the affected senses in part contributes to the continued use of the phrase "suspension of disbelief" to describe the leap necessary for viewers to enter the objective realm of film. It is also this disparity that creates a "critical" gap for the entry of analysis and speculation about the whole work of art. In *The Responsibility of Forms*, Roland Barthes describes this phenomenon as a "parasitical" relationship between the two media that make up the whole work of art, in which the sounds and language intentionally "connote the image... 'enliven' it with one or more secondary signifieds"; it is the sounds "which come to sublimate, patheticize or rationalize the image" (14).¹⁰ Sound, ultimately, is accessory information that guides the viewer into or away from a certain interpretive endeavor, even to the extent that a character's tone of voice may suggest irony not otherwise visibly present, but elemental to constructing an understanding of what both precedes and follows.

Furthermore, this parasitical effect may differ in degree according to the relative closeness of the sound to the action, but ultimately the sound cannot "'duplicate' the image" in a work composed of separately-developed messages (Barthes 15). Essentially, this gap, full of connotative and denotative relationships between the two media, creates the space for speculation about any number of things upon which the critic might wish to focus, including authorial intent, Marxist or other specialized form of interpretation, and, of course, the more general "what does it mean?" Even the genre of music video, with its discontinuous (if present) visual themes or story lines, its mixture of black and white, color and animation, its flashiness and consumer-friendliness, still retains a space for critical approach, if for nothing else the reconciliation of the visual message with the aural message. A video as disparate in the relative closeness of its aural and visual messages as Peter Gabriel's "Sledgehammer," with its constantly morphing Claymation figures fronting a rather conventional pop song, contains just as much room for Jamesonian analysis as the seemingly close relationship developed between aural and visual in Michael Jackson's "Thriller," in which the story line of the visual mimics closely the images suggested by the lyrics. As long as a visual motion work of art is constructed or ordered with this gap between sound and image, Jameson and his adherents possess a mandate to interpret and cognitively map whatever comes their way just as much as his opponents such as Fiske and Manuel possess a similar mandate to discredit Jameson's assumptions about the nature of the visual motion medium.

Until EBN's *Commercial Entertainment Product*, music video exhibited clearly this parasitical relationship of which Barthes writes; however, this aspect of music video, once thought to be inherent to the medium, can now be understood as a characteristic of individual texts and not a marker of the way in which music video conveys artistic or aesthetic information, thus paving the way for a clearer understanding of the way in which the music video medium, and visual motion artworks in general, operate. One of Kaplan's more interesting points is that music video, unlike traditional television or film (including the musical), operates in a "song-image format," where the imagery of a video is "evoked by song words (obviously arbitrary, quixotic even), and relayed through the voice and face of the rock star and band members"(47-48). And while there may be "no narrative proper...and nothing corresponding to the Hollywood conception of 'character,'" the lyrics take on the role of signifier as they loosely dictate the content of the product's visual element. Video segments arise from the objective realm of the artist's or director's interpretation of the lyrics, synchronized or ordered by the progression of the images as dictated by each word. In essence, two levels of information exist in music videos made as such, the absence of a one-to-one correspondence between them creating the space for textual interpretation that enables Kaplan's (and other conventional critics') analytical objectives. This space, which to varying degrees applies to all filmic forms since the addition of sound to film, will become a focal element in understanding how music video production and its attendant theorization are currently changing. Yet Kaplan demonstrates clearly that the images arise as a

response or perhaps reaction to the contents of the lyrics in a song, attempting to render through a(n imperfect) translation into imagery the respective emotions or aesthetic goals of the artist's musical work.

III. THE CHANGING NATURE OF MUSIC VIDEO ANALYSIS

Rock videos may be seen as revitalizing the dead images (of television and film) by juxtaposing and re-working them in new combinations that avoid the old polarities. This may be the only strategy available to young artists struggling to find their place in society and to create new images to represent the new situation they find themselves in.

Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock* 47

DJ culture—urban youth culture—is all about recombinant potential. It has as a central feature a eugenics of the imagination. Each and every source sample is fragmented and bereft of prior meaning—kind of like a future without a past. The samples are given meaning only when re-presented in the assemblage of a mix.

Paul D. Miller/DJ Spooky, liner notes to *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*

As we have seen, traditional music video (and film) orders content before rhythm; a two-person dialog, when shot for film, will fall into consistent editing patterns as a result of the emotional ebb and flow of the conversation, closing in for an extreme close-up accentuating an ultimatum followed quickly by a reaction shot. The label “action shot” itself reveals this predilection with plot progression over all other concerns. Newer video production processes, however,

operate in a different way; in the work of Coldcut and EBN, rhythm becomes the primary concern, followed by sonic confluence, with content the third, if at all present, concern. This new method illustrates the limits of cognitive mapping and other conventional modes of visual motion art criticism by eliminating the "parasitic" gap Barthes contends creates connotation, and by extension, traditional criticism. This technique, known as audio-visual sampling, allows audio-visual artists such as EBN and Coldcut to create original musical and visual art simultaneously, thus eliminating the parasitical function present in more conventional forms of cinematic production.¹¹ The groups, who use as their raw artistic material old television and film footage, arrange and organize bits and pieces into a rhythmic continuity, "looping" together repeated images and sounds that maintain, advance, and explore the composite nature of the musical rhythm.¹² In doing so, these artists challenge traditional notions about the value of reused imagery, suggesting that the medium is not inherently commodified, but instead a veritable playground for the release of creative energy.

On one level, as EBN use old film, newsreel and news clip footage, they retain aspects (key or important) of the original soundtrack, at once remaining sonically "true" in historical terms to the visual "origin" of the sound, while adding conventional musical elements which mimic the visual rhythmic patterns of the original footage. In their video, "378," which appears on EBN's sophomore album, *Telecommunication Breakdown*, the sound and image of a "punk" choir boy sustaining a single pitch initiates the video and song, quickly followed by the introduction of a man playing string bass and

the sound of that string bass. None of the original footage has been altered in any political sense; what appears on screen has a one-to-one relationship with what emanates from the speakers or dedicated sound system. A few moments later, a whistle and the faint sound of a guitar take up the role of the melodic trope, and what appears on the screen is its original visual component--an old black-and-white image of a cowboy whistling and strumming his guitar. What does change between the original footage and what appears in "378" is the continuity of the original, and obviously so: it's been sampled and manipulated at the level of the corporeal, the level of the medium itself. As each "separate" part enters the visual and aural mix of the work, it conforms to the rhythmic parameters established at the video's beginning, in essence, its tempo. In addition to this, EBN adds a level of commentative sound which also conforms to the established rhythmic parameters, but in an unconventional way; EBN builds upon the key or focal sound of a visual clip, in turn enhancing the original audio, but on its own terms. In the background of the cowboy image is a superimposed clip of a presumably early-television era program in which Native Americans dance in choreographed fashion to the beat of a drum, the same beat which provides rhythmic parameters for the whistling cowboy image. While the original sound of the drumbeat remains, cymbals and a highhat have been added to accent or stylize the rhythm; these have a clear rhythmic correspondence with the original image. In defining the one-to-one relationship of the added material, we may consider the movements of the foregrounded male Native American to visually represent the sound of the drums (as is

implied in the *original* footage), while the marginalized female Native Americans represent the added percussive elements.¹³

On another level, EBN retains the aspects (subject, motion, etc) of the visual document, but "loop" them into a repetitive pattern that reflects and replicates the rhythmic musical patterns of both the original and added soundtracks. EBN's musical output most closely resembles hip-hop, a term best understood as a concept of musical production in which the artist utilizes many different and often divergent cultural influences to create music.¹⁴ This concept of construction privileges rhythmic pattern and repetition, essentially operating in the same way as the simulacrum. Accordingly, EBN creates its music by repeating certain sounds and melodic and harmonic tropes, periodically foregrounding certain elements of the musical fabric to illustrate the unique yet pliable nuances of those elements; their video sampling technique operates on the same principles. The image of the string bassist is not continuous in the sense of the original. The superhuman movement of the bassist's hands indicates the disregard for editing continuity; at one moment his hands are located near the top of the instrument, then magically in another place the next instant. Nonetheless, the image corresponds directly with the sound it represents to the extent that when the aural message "jumps" from sample to sample, the visual does exactly the same. Similarly, the drumbeat which "directs" the Native Americans' dancing loops moebius-like onto itself, and the image of the Native Americans follows suit, looping itself at the whims of the rhythmic parameters of the whole work. Thus the patterns of motion perceived on the screen reflect the

production dynamics of the music, creating a veritable double-helix of operational and content reflexivity.

This sampling process creates an equality between the visual and aural messages lacking in conventional modes of artistic production. What is seen is both real and original in the sense that any meaning (if we were to assign any in a Jamesonian approach) is new and in no way co-opted by the historical content of the footage, and unreal and reproduced on the "literal" level. Approximately two minutes into the video, the music takes a turn as the sounds of multiple saxophones, numerous people sighing "aaah," and a chime take over the melody. The images accompanying these sounds are rather clearly from television's past; the first and third sounds accompany the image of three men creating "crowd noise" in a microphone for a radio show and singers chiming in moments later, while the image of ballroom saxophonists gradually fades in and out as they play their scales. However, neither of these images seems laden with historical meta-narratives, and attempting to construct some sort of meaning based on their historical significance seems futile. Instead, their presence in the video seems to rely solely upon the rhythmic contributions each image and sound makes to the overall texture of the work. Similarly, we are presented with two possible "reasons" for the video's name: one in the form of yet another early television era sample, an "alien" mincing out the words "three, seven, eight;" the other a sample of a color western in which a character picks up his revolver and declares, "three, seven, eight." Neither image suggests the presence of anything narrative in nature aside from a simple

declaration of the work's title, for both are superimposed on the fading saxophones and radio men. Individual analysis and cognitive mapping reveal the same results. In a similar fashion, separate analysis of the visual and aural tracks yields nothing less than a one-to-one correspondence with little if any room for interpretation.

What we are left with is an impenetrable text, in Jamesonian terms. The historical referents are disenfranchized, the gap between the sound and the image is no longer present: this is "mass culture as sheer manipulation, sheer commercial brainwashing and empty distraction" (Jameson, *Signatures* 21). And it isn't. What appears on the screen as "378" is the product of a highly-specialized skill melded to elaborate technology intended to demonstrate the individual's ability to both interact with and counter the multinational corporations Jameson feels "obviously control every feature of the production and distribution of mass culture today" (*Signatures* 21). Part parody, part response, "378" and other videos produced using visual sampling engage in cultural revision and reinscription, in that the individual artists at the local level actively depoliticize the original footage with all its "unconscious" messages to produce a product representative of so much of contemporary life, with all of its cyclic events and happenings. Like hip-hop DJ's, who took music packaged for consumption and remade them "through scratching, cutting, and sampling," EBN, using visual sampling, transform filmic art consumption into production, thereby eliminating consumption's passive quality and returning to the consumer population the ability to create art independent of the need to create an explanation to accompany it (Potter 36).¹⁵ Hence, the

disappearance of the parasitical relationship between image and sound through visual sampling ultimately achieves Marxist critical objectives by eliminating the method utilized by Marxist critics such as Jameson. We no longer need that kind of theorizing; thanks to EBN, we have, in fact, achieved the goal of recaptured artistic authorship.

In using rhythm, not content, as an organizational basis for their artistic creations, EBN and other audio-visual sampling artists create a new residence for the political in their works. Traditional political propaganda in the public sphere, be it a logo or song, a television program or newsreel, has usually been conveyed through the space of content; relying upon symbolism and stereotyping, such famous works as Howard Chandler Christy's "I Want You" military recruitment poster or Veit Harlan's *Jud Süss* (1940) rested on the presumption that a shared set of experiences or feelings would arise at the sight of visual or narrative cues; in short, their ability to communicate a propagandic theme relies on the viewer's abilities to cognitively map them into the socio-political fabric of the period. While both of these examples remain poignant today, they begin to falter in their effectiveness as time moves on, for the number of people who recognize and understand the cultural cues surrounding those images dwindles with each passing year. In short, the propagandic quality resists timelessness because the content necessarily arose from constructs prevalent in culture at that time. This seems to be a peripheral consideration of Jameson's when he makes the argument that current video production practices rely upon the use of old film and television footage, for, as Baudrillard points out, the simulacric paradigm

necessarily divests the original of its historical potency as the copy of the original comes into being: "it is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle" (352). This, however, is not the case with the work of EBN, Coldcut, or any number of other artists who construct music video and film from past works. While it falls away from the content in such works as "378," the propagandic element nonetheless remains alive and well in the ever-changing structure of the work: the rhythm is the propaganda.

Inasmuch as rhythm, a function of music video creation, conveys a consistent and repetitive artistic message, it becomes the mode of information transfer. In the tradition of classical documentary production 'a la John Grierson, who emphasized editing techniques over content as the means of communicating information,¹⁶ EBN utilizes the communicative power of image repetition and manipulation to convey its message. While we may not understand (nor, would EBN argue, are we *supposed* to understand) the significance of the images themselves, we can, nonetheless, construct a "meaning" from the way in which the images are assembled without relying upon the crutch of assumed collective knowledge as Jameson does. In another video which appears on the *Telecommunication Breakdown* release, "Electronic Behavior Control System," EBN relies overwhelmingly on images of recent well-known American political, social, and entertainment figures; many people will readily recognize Presidents Bush, Clinton, and Eisenhower, Vice President Al Gore, Ross Perot, Bill Moyers, William Shatner, Dick Clark, Ted Koppel, and perhaps

others. Yet because of the video's visual arrangement, with six discretely framed images rapidly altering in perspective and location on the viewing screen's frame, combined with the lightning-quick looping and editing techniques which create the foundation of the musical rhythm driving the video, no one image remains on the screen long enough to be cognitively mapped based solely upon its position in the video. Current American audiences, nonetheless, will recognize these images as originating on television as the creatively-sampled and manipulated "lyrics" suggest, placing them loosely within the context of recent elections and the attendant media coverage devoted to them; based on the fact that we see a revolving set of Clinton, Perot, Koppel and other images chanting the song's title, "Electronic Behavior Control System," we might today remember that the 1992 U.S. Presidential election was widely considered to have been won on television, and therefore interpret the video within that context, seeing as its message the notion that television's incredible power is, in fact, an electronic behavior control system used by those with access to manipulate democratic processes previously considered sacred and inviolable.¹⁷ However, ten or fifteen years from now, because the images acquire propagandic value in this medium through repetitive appearance as dictated by audio-level manipulation carried over to the visual level, the message will not lose any of its potency or effect. Although historically the work will lose some significance, its resonant idea will, as Hofstadter suggests, remain the same because there is a root idea, that television is an electronic behavior control system, as dictated by the multiple images that appear on the screen over and over again. If

the image sequence had appeared as it did in the original, unmanipulated, the images as they intersect our memory of them would, as Jameson rightly suggests, carry more import than just the phrase “electronic behavior control system”; we would have to search our memories of the election’s television coverage to understand EBN’s intent in using the old footage. However, because those images accumulate an aesthetic and political weight solely on the basis that they appear over and over again, we are freed from the necessity to map the work cognitively to make sense of it because the historical function of the sampled images has been rhythmically co-opted. In short, we get the message through the rhythm, not from our ability to recognize instantly the historical import of the image. As a general element of the medium, we may understand EBN’s work to delineate more clearly the communicative process of visual motion art, where more than just the content can and often does transmit the aesthetic and political intent of the artist and his/her work.

With the initial installment of their “Natural Rhythms Trilogy,” the two-person DJ team/band Coldcut took EBN’s ideas further into the realm of the apolitical political. Their first video in the trilogy, “Natural Rhythm,” consists of music and video created through audio-visual samples of plants, animals, and primitive tribe members captured in the act of making sounds of all kinds. The work that arises is an interesting, ever-changing series of superimposed images which have a clear one-to-one correlation to the sounds which compose the song, just as EBN’s “378” and “Electronic Behavior Control System,” where the images themselves never remain on the screen long enough to

facilitate the construction of a narrative, but instead reflect the rhythmic weight of the sounds they represent. In the liner notes to the CD-ROM-only release of the video on the "Atomic Moog 2000" single, band members Matt Black and Jonathan Moore state that,

(t)he average pop video is saying nothing because the visuals have no connection to the music they are bolted onto. It's time for a new approach. It's also time for multimedia to undergo the same DIY revolution that music making underwent in the late 80s with the advent of sampling and sequencing technology. "Natural Rhythm" is an experiment by Coldcut/Hexstatic directed towards these statements.

In a telephone interview conducted with the band members following the release of their combined album and CD-ROM called *Let Us Play*, which contains eight videos created in much the same fashion, Jonathan Moore explained further what he referred to as Coldcut's "non-agenda" as it relates to the liberation of music video making:

Well, TV, video and music need to re-mix, and the tools are becoming available so you can do that in your bedroom or your own desktop. They're there, and we're pointing out to people that you don't have to follow the same old story and you don't have to pay \$40,000 to some special video producer to make an expensive video with lots of bums and tits in it. You can do your own tip and you can tightly and intimately synch your music to your picture, which is an entirely fuller effect, really.

The "fuller effect," continues Moore, is

where what you hear is what you see; I suppose that's the ultimate point. On Timber, for example, the sounds that make up the track and the video are sequenced together, so it's sorta misuse of a video sampling software program and turning it into a combined video and music sequencing software program.

What Coldcut attempt to do with their artistic production is to continue to wrestle the power to create original music video from the hands of commercial interests such as music companies and media conglomerates, so that videos simultaneously exit the realm of commodification to stand on their own as works of art unlike their predecessors. Moore notes that this desire to recapture artistic power has arisen from the fact that "people are just tuning out" from culture because the way the messages are conveyed through film and television has become so familiar that they no longer carry any new communicative effect. Thus their work serves to "remix" rhythmically the images we see every day on the television and film screens into a new message, where the number of times an image appears on a screen takes on the communicative weight of the corresponding sound's presence in the song underlying the video.

An analysis of the aforementioned "Timber," which appeared as a special CD-ROM containing multiple videos in early 1998, illustrates just how political an apolitical message can get. However, this is not the political unconscious of which Jameson speaks, but a politics of information relay, where the act of assigning political content is reserved for each and every viewer; like Coldcut themselves, who wish

to educate audiences about the ease with which they can “remix” media to make personalized meaning, “Timber,” in its structural organization, conveys visual and aural information which allows the viewer or listener to choose a political meaning without overt direction from the text.

Coldcut seem to challenge head-on Jameson’s cognitive mapping in their choice of raw footage for “Timber,” which was culled from Greenpeace archives, even though they espouse a political agenda in the liner notes: “Timber is a protest song. Its creators, like all ‘intelligent’ beings, are concerned by our abuse of the Biosphere and its lifeforms. Timber is an attempt to voice these concerns in an effective way, using direct sensory communication rather than words.” To this end, Coldcut begins “Timber” with images of a rainforest, where the focal point is the static quality of the environment; the attendant sound is exactly what one would expect if watching a documentary, for the snapping of twigs, singing of birds and rustling of foliage dominate a low electronic bassline serving as the song’s foundational note. As the image of one tree falling becomes clear aurally and visually, the song immediately develops its tempo at the precise moment the tree’s trunk crashes to the ground, where the sound of a handsaw grinding away serves the metronomic function of marking the quarter, eighth, and sixteenth-note intervals that dominate the entire song’s common time (4/4) fabric. As a contrasting, almost harmonious element, the sound and image of a telegraph machine being tapped out in time to the saw’s rhythm creates a different yet complementary rhythmic pattern that alternates in time with images of the hand saw cutting

away at a plank of wood. This sequence builds both visually and aurally, adding first the sound and image of a man driving a spike into a log on the last eighth note of the second eight beats, then cramming the sound and image of a power saw cutting a plank of wood into the same space with the man driving the spike eight beats later, reducing to equal one-sixteenth parts the presence of both images and sounds. Before this initial sequence closes, two more images of sawing join the rhythm, so that between the telegraph and handsaw images, a rapid series of other images and sonic textures stabilize and define the relative significance of the images and sounds that will follow in the remainder of the video. By incrementally developing the audio-visual rhythm at the beginning of the video, Coldcut insures that conventional propagandic techniques will take a distant second seat to the rhythmic import of the images.

Because they flit across the screen in time to the unique and original music that composes "Timber," none of these images is inherently propagandic. The telegraph, the saws, and the man driving the spike are all quite common in their communicative potential, conveying information more as a result of image ordering than through the release of alternate histories that suggest a political unconsciousness. If anything, the syntax of the sequence might be understood to translate into a simple statement, where one-to-one correlation of image, sound, and text is the only way of fruitfully interpreting the aesthetic intent of Coldcut: the cutting down of trees has a direct relationship to communication, or perhaps commerce. One might go so far as to interpret the telegraph sounds as warning

sounds which spell the doom of the rainforest, but to do so is willfully to superimpose the interpreter's agenda onto the organizational pattern of the text, something that the syntax of the combined sound-image does not automatically warrant. Instead, this opening sequence is more informational than anything else, pointing out a relationship between human action and nature.

With the close of this section, however, the political begins to creep into the language of the video. Initiating the next section on the upbeat is the image of a person's hand turning a car's ignition, where the corresponding sound of a car starting up leads directly into a quickly-paced series of chopping sounds backed by different footage of people chopping wood in some fashion. We may take this to mean that the act of starting a car equals the chopping down of trees, a message not inherently political, but suggestive of a relationship between two elements not normally associated together. What Coldcut achieves is nothing less than liberating the political from the realm of the subject, the video, and returning it to the mind of the viewer, who can choose to grant a political reading to an otherwise objective rendering of a realistic (if not commonly acknowledged) relationship. It seems difficult to imagine that anyone would inherently read the video's syntax as political, for in no uncertain terms, the video suggests a relationship between human consumption and the collection of natural resources that, in fact, exists. Granted, many steps have been left out in the rendering of this relationship, but as a way of conveying metaphoric information, Coldcut's choice of sound and image here reveals the group's objective approach to "voicing

(environmental) concerns in an effective way," one that will allow the viewer to make up his/her own mind as opposed to being overly assaulted by a particular dogma.

As the video continues, Coldcut further develops the rhythmic complexity of the song and video by inserting a refrain composed of a man working a chainsaw, termed by Coldcut the "chainsaw solo." This refrain consistently frames the entire video and takes on great significance during juxtapositions with other images of deforestation; the chainsaw solo is the sound of humanity in the rainforest, and the accompanying image suggests that industry as encapsulated in the chain saw uses many natural resources. Here again, the message is relatively objective, in that the use is not characterized as anything other than a repetitive action; viewers are left to their own devices to discern whether this is a good thing or not. Then another image enters the fabric of the "Timber." Coldcut selects cuts of a rainforest inhabitant, female, singing perhaps a story or allegory with intense passion; its effect is hypnotic, despite the video's clear foundation in creative if not jarring editing. As politically suggestive or emotive as such a choice might seem, Coldcut makes looping and editing changes to the original footage of the young rainforest inhabitant so that her singing fits within the rhythmic pattern of the music, where her diced singing becomes the melody of the song, and her face the origin of the sound. The image of the woman, backed by morphing images of rainforest clearing machinery such as trucks and bulldozers, takes on all sympathetic weight not from the superimposition of images, but from the music which represents the morphing machine imagery. The

music of the machinery, based visually and aurally on the same bassline sounds used in the opening of the video, develops into a series of minor and diminished chord structures, where the progression is from the dominant seventh chord, to a diminished second, followed by minor fourth, then back to the dominant seventh, each chord receiving eight beats. This structure, in which the two middle chords foreground a lack of tonal resolution in the eight-tone scale typical of western music, may be said to carry with it a sense of foreboding that directly affects the images with which they correspond. However, such is a matter of personal or individual taste; the chord progression itself resolves as it begins, suggesting an ambivalence in the music as well as the images to taking an overt political stance. Coldcut may have hoped that viewers' emotions would be heightened by this particular construction, but the syntax of the images intersecting the music even in this section imparts an objective rendering of information that pushes the act of locating the political upon the viewer. Thus, despite all of Coldcut's commentary in the liner notes about "Timber"'s political nature, the song illustrates first and foremost the ineffectiveness of cognitive mapping through its rapid use of essentially unidentifiable images; instead the rhythmic syntax of the images, and not the content of the images, contains the potential to convey political meaning in the music video format.

Before releasing the *Timber EP* in 1998, Coldcut decided to conduct an experiment which further explored the possibilities and potential of simultaneous audio-visual sampling techniques. Having been familiar with EBN's releases as well as their work on the 1992

Lollapalooza Festival tour and U2's now famous *Zooropa* multimedia tour of the same year, Coldcut requested EBN to create a remix of the "Timber" video, using the original footage supplied by Greenpeace in conjunction with their own back catalogue of audio-visual samples. EBN accepted, and the result serves to validate the essentially apolitical nature of imagery in the music video format. In their audio-video remix, EBN creates its own chainsaw solo based on a slightly different rhythm; they also retain the rapid-fire sequence of chopping images that compose the original video's rhythmic substructure, yet it too changes due to the new rhythm EBN develops for its own version. Intact as well are the images of the young rainforest inhabitant, but the sounds of her voice are here manipulated to better serve the musical aesthetic EBN constructs. Instead of a haunting, sweet song, the rainforest inhabitant sounds more like a broken music box, where only high treble peaks and the lowest of the bass register have been maintained to accentuate the fractured nature of the song's new hip-hop musical sensibility. EBN add to this a new image, that of the studio drummer who pounds out the new percussion element that organizes the rhythm of the song. This addition changes the political nature of the song altogether, for the syntax of rapid chopping images sonically blends well together with the altered voice of the rainforest inhabitant, although on the visual level, the syntax fails to convey inherently a political message of any kind, short of likening the drumming of a musician to the butchering of a young female's ability to sing in the disappearing rainforest. As much as someone with knowledge of Greenpeace's pro-active stance toward rainforest

preservation might be led to presume EBN's remix of "Timber" to be a political statement, the fact remains that the language of the images does not convey politics; it conveys images and rhythms which simply, to paraphrase Fiske, are ("MTV" 79).

In thinking about the impact of these new editing and production techniques for music video, we must recognize that music video as a medium does not operate exactly like either film or television. In the remix of "Timber" done by Protean Vision Quest, a computer-generated narrative of a young boy playing in his room backed by synthesized strings frames the group's use of the original footage; here, the images of deforestation and the young female singing lie within the context of an urban youth learning through virtual reality the reason behind his encasement in a cement environment. Nonetheless, the original rainforest images remain syntactically divorced from the artificial narrative, thus retaining a sense of the apolitical amidst the political tendencies of the narrative framework, taking on political, anti-deforestation tendencies only within the context of that specific video's framing mechanism. In this way, the medium has its own tendencies, its own unique qualities, its own language, all of which must be clearly and carefully analyzed and thoughtfully considered. The medium of music video is not inherently commodified, even though it began as such and remains susceptible to those tendencies; it is instead a medium that privileges rhythmic organization over content, where the political unconscious defers to the text's presentation of raw information, be it in the form of original footage or, as EBN and Coldcut illustrate, in manipulated and recycled imagery.

Thanks to the work of EBN and Coldcut, music video may now be approached in a way that explores the rhythmic function of imagery and music simultaneously, for the medium truly *is* the message.

Perhaps the most important aspect of approaching art, and more specifically visual motion art, from this new understanding is to reconsider the very nature of perceiving the space of visual motion art. What we often take for granted is that the space of the objective contents of a filmic work, be they the antics of a screwball comedy or the more serious elements of a historical film, reside *in that space*. More correctly, we tend to forget that, regardless of the time period of the work's content, it nonetheless exists as a work of art in the present of its making. Yet so much critical work makes no acknowledgement of the serious consequences of mixing periodicity with creative origination; we jump into films and comment upon them as though they magically arose from a leather trunk hidden in the attic, as though they themselves came into being during the time period of the content. Perhaps the most important thing we can take from this new understanding of audio-visual sampling and the rhythmic ordering of meaning and content is the way in which we interpret the content of visual motion works of art of any kind, form, or genre. No longer are we limited to the guesswork of presumed agendas based on our often imperfect knowledge of a particular work's historical context; thanks to EBN, Coldcut, and the legion of artists willfully manipulating our sense of cultural historicity, we can now derive meaning from the text through the unique nature of the medium itself. Like dance and theater, visual motion art communicates aesthetic properties as its contents actually

move, and now that artists are beginning to explore the nuances of moving images in the wake of the valueless frozen image, viewers can interpret their productions without the need of memory. As the communicative potentials of rhythmic ordering and editing become more prevalent in television shows and movies in the mainstream, people will find it easier to make constructive evaluations that have a more timeless relevance to the work of art. Because they will be looking to the tendencies of the medium, and not the period in which the piece was made, future critics will be able to locate a world of meanings without having to crack open a single book.

Notes

¹ Because cataloging the development of MTV and music video as a cultural force is outside the realm of this study, see Banks for an exhaustive list of magazine and journal articles devoted to outlining just such a project.

² See Potter, 25-54 for an interesting and lively history of the development of disc jockeying as an art form.

³ I choose to use the collective pronoun "we" in framing the discourse that follows because I feel that approaching music video from a critical perspective includes every single person exposed to music videos; inasmuch as I wish to preempt past modes of critical activity concerning music video, I also wish to promote the concept that critical activity need not be restricted to those who've simply seen more videos than anyone else. This is not, however, an end-all-be-all manual to understanding music video as it now functions in culture, but a dismantling of the stifling critical modes that limit the ways in which "we" can discuss the merits of music video in an effective, engaging, *and* productive fashion.

⁴ I take 1981 as the beginning of music video proper largely because MTV's debut in that year was the first watershed event in music video's development. Granted, forms of music video pre-date 1981, such as The Beatles' film *Hard Days Night* (1964), as well as video-taped performances of live shows by many artists, but these laid, at best, a faint foundation for what was to emerge in 1981.

⁵ Kaplan argues that while music videos may aspire to the avant-guard end of filmic categories in recent film theory, they remain essentially postmodern because the viewer or spectator remains decentered due to the continuous flow of visual information, as opposed to traditional film's tendency to locate the spectator in a voyeuristic position that "encourages in the cinema regression to Oedipal childhood processes (particularly the voyeuristic/fetishistic gaze) much discussed by film theorists (42). Inasmuch as Kaplan accepts numerous

similarities between the individual products of each medium, she nonetheless privileges the way in which the products reach the spectator as the deciding factor in how we all view music video.

⁶ While numerous labels have been devised to further categorize new music videos and their production processes, Kaplan's classifications continue to be effective tools to describe and analyze music videos in a generic sense; the majority of scholarly articles since the appearance of her book reference it as a primary source. Her work is the first (and still one of the most exhaustive) to scour the imagery and cultural and artistic significance of music video and MTV; thus I defer to her invigorating scholarship as a hallmark in an area of cultural study that remains inundated primarily by entertainment journalism and historical accounts of MTV's development. For an erudite, well-researched historical account of MTV's development, see Denisoff; a more entertaining history is McGrath's. Banks, while well-researched, focuses more on "the political economy of communications" and the way in which MTV, and defacto music videos, have influenced the entertainment industry at the expense of delving into the "limitations of textual analysis" (9, 7). Nonetheless, all three books contain interesting, if not entirely useful, cultural-response information regarding the effects of MTV and music videos.

⁷ For an account of MTV's video selection process, which, according to Kaplan, strictly limited the airing of non-white-male artists, see pages 14-16 of her study.

⁸ I have chosen to use Colin MacCabe's language to describe Jameson's methodology because Jameson's prose style is not conducive to the brevity of this study. In the numerous articles by Jameson I have read, I have been hard-pressed to find concise language that would not require extensive and distracting contextualization; even MacCabe notes this tendency in Jameson's prose, where "the first encounter with these long and complex sentences in which the sub-clauses beat out complicated theoretical rhythms can be almost vertiginous" (ix).

⁹ For a more in-depth discussion of Schroedinger's cat paradox, see Davies,

30-36.

¹⁰ Specifically, Barthes uses the model of the press photograph and its accompanying caption to illustrate this point, noting that a gap exists between the two media's abilities to equalize the meanings (that which is "signified") that both connote and denote the whole of the message sent.

¹¹ For technical and statistical information on EBN's visual sampling process, see "Emergency Broadcast Network" in *Alternative Press*, 58-59, and "Emergency Broadcast Network" in *Trance Europe Express* 3, 187-91.

¹² By "composite nature of musical rhythm" I suggest that many kinds of sonic textures, those of a snare, bass drum, cymbals, etc., combined into one "rhythm" create a whole (often characterized as such by a name: the tango, samba, waltz, etc.) yet remain separate and individual sounds, distinguishable from others.

¹³ See Goodwin 49-71 for an excellent discussion of synaesthesia, "the intrapersonal process whereby sensory impressions are carried over from one sense to another, for instance, when one pictures sounds in one's 'mind's eye'" (50).

¹⁴ For a discussion and definition of hip-hop, see Potter 25-28.

¹⁵ See also De Kerckhove 54-59 for further discussion of the concept of "prosumers" (58).

¹⁶ For a discussion of the differences between the two emergent schools of documentary theory in the early twentieth century, see Ellis 3-5.

¹⁷ See Rushkoff, 67-99 for an interesting investigation of the degree to which television played a pivotal role in the 1992 U.S Presidential election.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Brom. "The Gospel According to Jameson." *Telos* 74 (1988): 116-25.
- Ang, Ien. *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences For a Postmodern World*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Banks, Jack. *Monopoly Television: MTV's Quest to Control the Music*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1996.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1985.
- Baudrillard, Jean. "The Precession of Simulacra." *Simulations*. Trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman. New York: Semiotexte, 1983. Rpt. in *A Postmodern Reader*. Ed. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon. New York City: State U of New York P, 1993. 342-75.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. By Benjamin. Trans. Harry Zohn. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken, 1968.

Browne, Nick. "American Narrative Studies of Film: Between Formalism and Postmodernism." *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 10 (1989): 341-46.

Coldcut. "Natural Rhythm." *Atomic Moog 2000 EP*. CD-Rom. Ninja Tune, ZEN CDS48, 1997.

---. Liner notes. *Let Us Play*. Ninja Tune, ZEN CD30, 1997.

Coldcut and Hexstatic. "Timber." *Timber EP*. CD-ROM. Ninja Tune, ZEN CDS65, 1998.

Davies, P. C. W. *The Ghost in the Atom: A Discussion of the Mysteries of Quantum Physics*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1986.

De Kerckhove, Derrick. *The Skin of Culture: Investigating the New Electronic Reality*. Toronto: Somerville House, 1995.

Deickmann, Katherine. "Video Killed the Video Star." *Spin* Aug. 1997: 70+.

Denisoff, R. Serge. *Inside MTV*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1988.

D. J. Spooky. Liner Notes. *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*. Asphodel, 0961, 1996.

Ellis, Jack. *The Documentary Idea: a Critical History of English-Language Documentary Film and Video*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989.

"Emergency Broadcast Network." *Alternative Press* Dec. 1995: 58-9

"Emergency Broadcast Network." *Trance Europe Express* 3 (1995): 187-91.

Emergency Broadcast Network. *Commercial Entertainment Product*. Videocassette. TVT, 1992.

---. "378." *Telecommunication Breakdown*. CD-ROM. TVT, TVT 4710-2, 1995.

---. "Electronic Behavior Control System." *Telecommunication Breakdown*. CD-ROM. TVT, TVT 4710-2, 1995.

Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980.

- Fiske, John. "MTV: Post-Structural Post-Modern." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10.1 (1986): 74-79.
- . "TV: resituating the popular in the people." *Continuum* 1.2 (1987):
1-8. <http://humpc61.murdoch.edu.au/~continuum/1.2/fiske>
- Goodwin, Andrew. *Dancing in the Distraction Factory*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992.
- Hofstadter, Douglas. *Metamagical Themas: Questing for the Essence of Mind and Pattern*. New York: Basic Books, 1985.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Signatures of the Visible*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- . *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture*. New York: Methuen, 1987.
- MacCabe, Colin. Preface. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* ix-xvi.

Manuel, Peter. "Music as symbol, music as simulacrum: postmodern, pre-modern, and modern aesthetics in subcultural popular musics." *Popular Music* 14.2 (1995): 227-39.

McGrath, Tom. *MTV: The Making of a Revolution*. Philadelphia, PA: Running, 1996.

Moore, Jonathan. Personal interview. 14 July 1997.

Potter, Russell. *Spectacular Veraculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*. SUNY Postmodern Culture Series. Albany: State U of New York P, 1995.

Rushkoff, Douglas. *Media Virus!: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture*. New York: Ballantine, 1994.

Wilson, Tony. "Reading the postmodern image: a 'cognitive mapping.'" *Screen* 31.4 (1990): 390-407.