Unruly Media

YOUTUBE, MUSIC VIDEO,
and THE NEW DIGITAL CINEMA

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For my husband, Charles Kronengold

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Introduction

UNRULY MEDIA: YOUTUBE, MUSIC VIDEO,
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I love the media swirl: its accelerating aesthetics. mingled media, and memes that cross to and fro. For a young person today, this swirl, I imagine, suggests never being bored. It all seems new—the ever-present buzzing, switching, and staccato thinking, the horizons that open onto friendship networks. Much has changed too, for labor, global flows of capital, and forms of power and leisure. *Unruly Media* takes seriously the ways moving media shape our experience. Many of us traverse from the videogame "Angry Birds" on a cell phone, to a YouTube clip, to a feature film in a big theater or on a desktop computer, to Facebook, and then a music video. It's all scrambled. But we might try to grasp this condition while we still have the chance. What *is* a YouTube clip? What's a music video, or a post-classical film?

We might think about the media swirl in several ways. One is to focus on genre. For each form I'm considering—YouTube, music video, and digital post-classical cinema—I'd claim we have a concept of what the primary stylistic features are and the purest example can be. YouTube provides a whoopee-cushion effect; music video conveys a brief state of suspended bliss; and post-classical cinema creates a continuous sense of traversal but also bewilderment, as if much has transpired too quickly or too opaquely. Where were we again? These films can make you feel like you've been pummeled or blindly led. A definitive YouTube example might be "The Sneezing Baby Panda"; for music video it might be Lady Gaga's "Paparazzi"; a quintessential post-classical film might be *Bourne Ultimatum*. But today each genre's influences ripple out maddeningly, creating interference, blendings, loosenings of boundaries in ways we've never seen. Beyoncé's music video "Countdown" looks like a clip on YouTube, as does Lana Del Rey's "Video Games." Segments from Edgar Wright's *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales*, and Julie Taymor's *Across the Universe* could be placed on YouTube and inadvertently experienced

as music videos, prosumers' mashups, art students' class-projects, or trailers. So we might try to understand a media object differently now—through its length, level of gloss, platform, viewing audience, or budget. YouTube often has short, sophomoric clips. Vevo has well-rounded, conservative, corporate-identified music videos. Netflix has longish high- and lowbrow Hollywood, foreign, and independent films. But, of course, these categories blur. I wouldn't be surprised to find a music video on Netflix, perhaps as part of a curated collection, or a feature film on YouTube. Vevo's boundaries are also soft. It screens documentary "makings of," musicians' interviews, and strings of thematically linked clips.

We could instead see all these media as similar. They've all been influenced by the same technologies and socioeconomic pressures. We're in the midst of an international style that has heightened sonic and visual features; they've been intermedially reconfigured and accelerated. A range of contemporary global media, including viral web media, music video, South Asian cinema, and the feature films of music video directors who have crossed over to cinema, have changed in similar ways, though this new intensified style has also permeated these forms unevenly. International genres with long traditions, such as British police procedurals and Hong Kong action films, have embraced the new style to stunning effect, while soap operas and the Metropolitan Opera's HD-simulcasts have been among the slowest to assimilate change. Focusing on sound/image relations in an era of intensified audiovisual aesthetics, we might chart the ways new digital technologies like free-downloadable editing software, 10.1 surround-sound, digital intermediary and computer-generated imagery shape the new style.

These new technologies provide the ground for the stylistic transformations that have unfolded in the last fifteen or so years. For today's media practitioners, the new technologies present exciting opportunities: all of a YouTube clip, music video, or film can be present and available, simultaneously, until the moment of release. One can fine-tune the sound and image; move blocks of footage forward or back; sub in new backgrounds or new actors. This is different from working on one of the first *Star Wars* films and having to send your assistant to the vault to locate two reels of film to splice together.

Today's media relations become malleable and volatile in a "mixing-board" aesthetic. Our accrued knowledge about how to work fluidly with this material is informed by music video. Music video's major contribution to today's audiovisual turn stems from the fact that ways of placing music and image together are *learned*: they form genealogies. One can't just speed up Godard and put music against it. Today's unique audiovisual relations developed through music video directors' and editors' experiments at reconfiguring images and sounds. Music video used new technology (cheap, reusable videotape) and had

new commercial and social demands (make it fast, creative, musical, different, wild). Today the soundtrack in toto has become "musicalized": sound effects and dialogue are now shaped alongside composed music into musical phrases. Sonic features can also adopt leading roles, driving the film; or sound can mediate, enabling individual film parameters to come to the fore. The image acquires a sense of speed and flexibility: the image's contents can seem as if they had been poured from one shot into the next. Cutting, too, can bestow an almost percussive rhythmic drive. An image in the new digital cinema often avoids a ground because the sound wafts it along.

These audiovisual forms of knowledge were shaped by music video. In the eighties music video was *the* laboratory: while commercials and films in that era tended toward tightly controlled client-author supervision and careful storyboarding, a music video director or editor might try anything. (Turn the image on its head and abut it with some red.) In the nineties music video directors streaming into cinema helped drive the new, audiovisually intensified, post-classical cinema. A second wave then immigrated, as industry funding, in response to free downloading, dried up in the 00s. Music video directors have flourished in the industry because they're especially attuned to the new technologies and the new audiovisual relations.

Many scholars of film, television, and new media have sought to address the nature and causes of our media swirl. David Bordwell claims that new production practices and media technologies like nonlinear editing systems and the video assist have engendered new approaches, but he emphasizes continuities with past media practices. Lev Manovich, on the other hand, believes we're now in an era of animation rather than pure cinema, and that database structures will supplant traditional narratives. This book focuses on the audiovisual turn. I argue that the sound-image practice developed in music videos, along with new audio software technologies that meld seamlessly with visual software, help produce a mediascape that foregrounds musical feature.[1] Multitracked, heavily produced popular music, especially, provides a model. Imagine it this way: new digital technologies allow a filmmaker to redraw an image of a house every time it occurs in a film. She can change its color in each iteration, and modify other parameters, like the texture of the forest behind it, or the sounds of crows sitting on its roof. This closely worked aesthetic is a popular music-industry practice. The soundtrack can be modulated to work with the scape of the image, and then the image, modulated once again.

This mixing-board aesthetic transforms much media, extending past YouTube and music video into post-classical cinema. Through an analysis of *Moulin Rouge!* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, this book shows the ways intensified audiovisual aesthetics can override traditional Hollywood film structure, turning "the five acts" into mere scaffolding that becomes hidden,

slackened, or overwritten by more prominent musical forms. YouTube clips are altered too, in part, to compete with the website's most popular content, music videos. And music videos, like Lady Gaga and Jonas Åkerlund's "Paparazzi" and "Telephone," now shimmer between traditional narrative and musical structures in ways never before possible.

"Musicality", of course, and "audiovisuality" can be elusive concepts. We might describe musical and audiovisual processes as fluid, flexible, heterogeneous, and affectively rich. Henri Bergson felt music could have a special relation to time, rhythm, memory, and attention.[2] Listeners may wish to hold onto what has unfolded in the past, while simultaneously staying in the saddle of time and reaching for the future. It can also seem "musical" when a media object switches sections around so that *befores* and *afters* shift. To be aware of everything happening in the moment, the heterogeneous slice from top to bottom, is also a condition of music and music video. Suzanne Langer wrote that music can be a subjective as well as a temporal art: it can show us the ebbs and flows of our emotions.[3]

Intensified audiovisual aesthetics and a parameter-by-parameter analytical approach can help us understand today's music video and digital cinema. Music videos are musical and so are sections of today's films, through their music-heavy accompaniments and bombastic or finely grained diegetic and nondiegetic sounds. The odd one out might appear to be YouTube. I'd argue that YouTube's most viewed content is music video, and many clips, though they're not quite music videos, function similarly (the 2008 Obama campaign clip "Yes We Can" is one example). User-generated content like mashups and remixes count as well. Brief verité clips like "Haha Baby" and "The Sneezing Baby Panda" also reflect intensified audiovisual aesthetics. YouTube clips become popular under tremendous Darwinian pressures. Those that come to the fore often showcase close, audiovisually heightened, parametric aesthetics even if they also reflect a more direct rendering of the world. A clip like "Evolution of Dance" possesses an uncanny rightness of proportion, color, scale, and graphic values that could be modeled as an animation, and the interaction between dancer and played-back, popsong-medley is musical. In sum, much media, across platforms and genres, driven by close audiovisual relations, are not what we grew up with.[4]

Because so many media are linked across genres and platforms, it is worth considering larger, virtual structures that stretch across the web. We might also seek to situate these chains of associations and technological and aesthetic shifts in relation to socioeconomic and cultural factors like capital flows, work speedup, and just-in-time labor. Recent scholarship has considered the ways mainstream Hollywood crystallizes the culture's most pressing contradictions into myth. Today's media, however, are dispersed across many forms and

platforms, so that we instead understand ourselves in relation to gender, class, race, sexual identity, labor, and power through constellations of sounds and images. Studies show that our ways of thinking, feeling, and dreaming have been transformed as well.[5] We might focus on the ways the new styles and techniques, most often *audiovisually intensified*, are contributing to a global experience.

I began with the question of identifying post-classical cinema, music video, and the YouTube clip. Even those we'd place at the center of their respective genres can seem riven and striated by the others. The following section describes what each genre is like *now*, and seeks to give a sense of its departure from the past. I'll conclude with examples of competition among genres.

Digital Cinema's Intensified Audiovisual Aesthetics

The Bourne Ultimatum, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, and *Moulin Rouge!* are films I consider post-classical; globally there's *Breaking News, Day Watch, Hot Fuzz*, and *Yuva*. Debates among film theorists center on whether these films break with the past or revamp older practices. In the historical-continuity-with-a-twist camp, David Bordwell argues that classical narrative structures endure alongside minor variants like "puzzle" films. Camerawork and editing, such as bipolar extremes of lens-lengths, a reliance on close shots, wide-ranging camera movements, and rapid editing, define this new "surface" style.[6] In the other camp, Eleftheria Thanouli claims that broader shifts have taken place: today's plots slacken as characters pursue diverse goals, and stories divide into intertwined subplots. These multigeneric films adopt a self-conscious stance, and realism becomes hypermediated.[7]

I'll add that I map the borders of the post-classical style through sentiment. From 2000 to 2007 cinema's horizons seemed wide open. Any film might be a surprise. Post-classical films seemed intended to make you say "Oh! Really?" while feeling savvy or sophisticated. It included several strands of filmmaking, not only those with Bordwell's "intensified continuity," puzzle plots, or a preponderance of audiovisual sequences. Specifically visual techniques played a role as well: an overpreening of the image (à la Wes Anderson, enabled by DI), extensive use of CGI (often inspired by comic books, as in *300* and *Watchmen*), and possibly HD. Perhaps these developments were not closely related, but at the time it felt like they were. Enabled by digital technologies, their surprise factor—often created through mannerist showboating and strings of affectively rich audiovisual sequences—separated them from seamless classical Hollywood.

Zack Snyder's 2011 *Sucker Punch* is a post-classical film, in part because it has five layers, two possible realities and another three possible dreamscapes,

all contradicting one another. The film ends like a music video. We don't understand what took place and we may feel driven to go back for another viewing. Perhaps *Sucker Punch*'s truths are locked somewhere in the soundtrack or between the soundtrack and the image (we're instructed to seek a key and there's much music and dancing). In *Sucker Punch* a heroine we know almost nothing about, incarcerated in a 19th-century insane asylum, is brought before "the theater," a large circular space, containing a stage, fellow inmates, an antique reel-to-reel tape player playing odd sound collages, and a schoolmarm advising performers to "sing away all the pain and guilt." This sounds like a pastiche of post-classical filmmaking and YouTube (à la "broadcasting your-self"), and as the protagonist defiantly heads the other way, she changes from one person into another and from one environment into another, while an alternative band sounding like seventies Genesis sings, "Where is my mind?" What's this got to do with anything? *Sucker Punch* exhibits post-classical tendencies turned musical: a music-video audiovisual passage in an overstylized setting, where sound effects both suture and make strange the image and the soundtrack. We shuttle back and forth across genres and media. We may want to argue that post-classical films employ pop songs to increase revenue streams, but why use one in *this* way? The scene is foregrounded here. "Where is my mind" seems to ask where we are in the media swirl. We're at a historical moment when directors and industry practitioners don't fully grasp their relation to revenue, audiences, or rights. They're bewildered and perhaps anxious. The scene seems to say, "It's wild, but stay here. Watch *this*." (See figure Intro.1.)

As another example, the trailer for *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* cues viewers that it's for a post-classical film. A former music video director known for extremely heightened audiovisual relations, Timur Bekmambetov, directed the film. In the trailer, many films seem to be echoed in its opening images: *Notorious, Birth of a Nation, The Matrix, Independence Day, Inception*, and, most importantly, *Inglourious Basterds*, the last because it presents a revisioning of a historical event. Perhaps the most strongly post-classical touch is the fusing of Lincoln and vampire killers in a fantastical setting, where anything might happen, including time travel ... why not zombies, ET, or an alien spacecraft? As with many post-classical films we're led through a changing landscape by the soundtrack. We simultaneously follow the *Inception*-like, repeated, honking bullhorn and a high-pitched ringing (has anyone yet capitalized on

Intro.1 "Where is my mind," from *Sucker Punch*. How do the song, the viewer, and the film relate to the media swirl?