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Low Budget Audio-visual Aesthetics in Indie Music Video and Feature Filmmaking: The Works of Steve Hanft and Danny Perez

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In this chapter I explore the interactions between music videos and feature films within the category of low-budget indie productions. I do so through the lens of authorship and focus on two particular directors who have moved between music video and feature film direction: Steve Hanft and Danny Perez. My focus on these directors aims to broaden the general points made about the music video's influence on indie feature filmmaking which have, up until now, largely explored more commercially-oriented and higher budgeted feature films. Within the broad indie sphere, there are a number of directors who have made features and music videos, including Sofia Coppola, Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, Michel Gondry, Spike Jonze, Floria Sigismondi, and Tarsem Singh. Work on how Coppola, Gondry, and Jonze move between music video and feature filmmaking, and how such works inform one another, have been subject to previous analyses.[1] Directors who work across music video and feature filmmaking can provide a good place to start thinking concretely about the influences of music video on feature filmmaking: indeed, Richardson (2011: 58) has argued that the "large number of film directors with a background in music videos … constitutes a compelling case for arguing how they have influenced new approaches to film." In this chapter I extend this authorial focus beyond the more commercial, privileged examples, who tend to operate within the "Indiewood" sphere, where Hollywood studio production merges with elements more associated with independent production (King 2009). Indie is, however, a broad category that also includes lower-budgeted, underground productions, and this is the area of indie production that I will explore through these two authorial case studies.

Hanft and Perez have both worked closely with a range of indie music artists through directing music videos and films, and both display a strong authorial signature across a number of their productions. Focusing on their work will enable me to identify some prominent traits of innovative directors, and to interrogate whether general points made about music videos influencing feature films apply to these low budget examples. Vernallis argues that music video is a particularly important influence on contemporary cinema, which is marked by "intensified audiovisual aesthetics."[2] In particular, a heightened "musicalization of the image" is evident: post-classical films "may be able to hold on to the traditional five-act structure, but within that all formal constraints become changed, and they approach a condition of music. […] this aesthetic makes the image, sound, and form more fluid".[3] Mathias Bonde Korsgaard has detailed the main aesthetic ways that cinema has incorporated the "MTV aesthetic" as follows:

> the increasing use and importance of popular music alongside moving images; an often closer framing; freer camera movements; a faster and more rhythmical editing; the use of loose, modular and fragmented narratives; the highlighting of visual spectacle; a glitzy look and color palette; and the use of non-representational imagery and visual effects.[4]

While acknowledging these techniques, Korsgaard stresses how difficult it is to definitively prove they are influenced by MTV because of the array of other factors that might have influenced their increased adoption into feature filmmaking. Despite such doubts Korsgaard still argues that the music video has influenced cinema even though it is "difficult to move beyond the level of assumption when it comes to tracing the influence of one medium upon another".[5]

Korsgaard makes an important point about assuming influences, but by focusing on particular interrelations between two directors' work across music video and feature films,

such influences can be more concretely identified. General patterns and tendencies across categories of aesthetic production are important and necessary to catalogue, but in practice they will always be inflected by more particular factors, including key production personnel, budgets, and adopted technologies. This chapter therefore looks at two lesser-known directors who have worked across music video and feature films, and who have tended to work in the indie area across both forms. The focus enables me to explore if broader points about music video and feature film interactions are applicable to lower-budgeted indie productions, in addition to analyzing the work of two interesting, yet largely overlooked directors who span these forms, and who have worked with evolving technologies that have impacted on the evolution of both music video and feature film production.

Lo-Fi Audio-Visions: Steve Hanft

Steve Hanft has directed three feature films, a few short films and a number of music videos.[6] His films are often saturated with musical cues and references, and he was also an indie musician in the band Loser, which featured future breakout star Beck. In many ways, it is Hanft's association with Beck that has resulted in greater interest circulating around his movies, though they are still very niche. *Kill the Moonlight* was actually made in 1991, having been started when Hanft was enrolled in CalArts Film, but he did not have the money to release the film. It was only after Beck's song 'Loser' became a surprise hit, following Beck being signed to a major label (Geffen), that he managed to gather funds to release the film. Hanft, whose first music video was 'Loser', did not enter feature filmmaking following an apprenticeship in music video, but gravitated from feature production to music videos (and then moved between these forms and short films). Nevertheless, *Kill the Moonlight* does include a few sequences that feel inspired by some forms of music video production, which is unsurprising considering that Hanft was steeped in music culture. Such influences

intermingle with a number of other influences, the most striking of which seem to be New Hollywood filmmaking and underground/experimental filmmaking.

The story of aspiring stock car racing driver Chance (Thomas Hendrix), *Kill the Moonlight* fits the mould of slow-paced, narratively drifting seventies films such as *Two Lane Blacktop* (Hellman, 1971) and, like that film, is a kind of anti-car race film: both movies downplay the thrills of car races and instead focus more on existential matters. In *Kill the Moonlight*, Chance attempts to gain money to enter a stock car race but never actually does so. The only car racing footage we actually witness in *Kill the Moonlight* is in the opening credits. The bulk of the film is concerned with the drifting Chance's attempts to seek out funds so he can fix up his own car and enter a race. The ending of the film also echoes *Two Lane Blacktop*, which concluded abruptly with a representation of film being burned in the projector. *Kill the Moonlight* ends suddenly when Chance crashes his car, depicted abstractly via a montage of fleeting images and accompanied by grating music (1:15:05). Hanft's incorporation of experimental techniques is no surprise considering he was taught by James Benning—who even briefly features in the film as Chance's landscaping boss—at CalArts. Hanft has himself discussed the abstract nature of *Kill the Moonlight*, noting how he was influenced by Benning, as well as other avant-garde filmmakers such as Warhol.[7] His interest in the abstract manifests itself in a fascination with texture, composition and acting. At various moments in the film concrete representation is abstracted: for example, faces are sometimes blurred, occasional snippets of abstract film are flashed, camera motion becomes jerky for no seeming reason.

Kill the Moonlight features a range of indie rock from around Los Angeles, as Hanft drew on a number of people who he already knew, including Beck. Beck, at the time an independent artist, was trading mostly in lo-fi folk and rock music, and he does so within *Kill the Moonlight*, but the soundtrack—which was released commercially—is mostly dominated

by what Hanft terms "garage rock."[8] Most of the bands were, and remain, little known and include The Pussywillows, Delta Garage, and The Dynamics. The bands on the soundtrack are nevertheless far from unified in their influences and various generic traces, including country rock, rockabilly and surf rock, are detectable in different artists' contributions. The use of songs in the film is frequent, though some are foregrounded to a greater extent than others. A few music tracks are briefly used as low volume source background (playing on a car radio or in in a bar, for example), and in these contexts the music does not influence the image flow in any discernible way. When the music is foregrounded on the soundtrack to the extent that it dominates then it more obviously impacts on the arrangement of images. This includes the presentation of musical performances: for example, when Chance visits a contact and The Dynamics are rehearsing in preparation to shoot a video; or when Beck performs/records songs in his recording shed. At other times, musical montages—moments when music comes to the fore and drowns out dialogue and ambient sound—are used. These montages in the film, such as when Chance goes out driving with Sandra just after she has told him she will lend him money to enter the car race (44:25), or when he gets mad with Dennis over money and goes out driving to vent his anger (55:35), function as intensive interludes. Reasonably compacted and hectic in contrast to the film's predominantly slow pace, these montages reflect rare, emotionally heightened states in a largely lackadaisical film: Chance's romantically-tinged sense of excitement and anger are depicted with music functioning to heighten such emotional tension.

The influence of music videos can therefore be detected in *Kill the Moonlight* to an extent (as Hanft was in a band himself and was involved in the LA music scene, he would have been familiar with music videos). Such an influence, however, is not as marked as the independent and new Hollywood influences on the film, and co-exists with additional touchstones such as experimental filmmaking and other types of music-focused filmmaking

(e.g. direct cinema, punk cinema). It is only after making this film that Hanft actually began to make music videos. In fact, he claims he was asked to direct music videos before this but was never interested in them as he was more focused on directing shorts and getting a feature made. However, he claims to have enjoyed the experience of making his first music video because he realised there was a lot of freedom to experiment and "do what you like" within the form.[9] This comment supports Steven Shaviro's contention that music videos enjoy a privileged position in terms of allowing freedom to experiment "with new modes of visual expression," because their "sonic content already comes ready-made and because they are usually of such short length."[10]

Hanft's video for Beck's 'Loser' not only made reference to *Kill the Moonlight* but also stirred further interest in the film, enabling Hanft to afford to get prints made and release the film.[11] Although 'Loser' was made when Beck was an independent artist, it gained a lot of airplay and became an unexpected success, leading to major label Geffen offering Beck a record contract. So, while initially released as a limited independent 12" single in 1993 on Bong Load records, it was re-released by Geffen subsidiary DGC in 1994, when it became a hit. The video itself makes references to *Kill the Moonlight*, most explicitly through Beck using a dialogue sample from the film in 'Loser'—Chance's "I'm a driver, I'm a Winner. Things are gonna change, I can feel it." The video features a brief flash of Chance from *Kill the Moonlight* when this sample is heard, so that it matches with a visual snippet of its source (2:56). There is a further reference to *Kill the Moonlight* when Beck wields a leaf blower in the video, a contraption that Chance also uses at one point in the film when carrying out one of his many menial jobs. The music video to 'Loser' also recalls, more generally, the film's aesthetic style in its loose formal arrangement, its lo-fi quality, and its playful abstraction. The music video format, however, led to Hanft increasing the abstract elements that fed into *Kill the Moonlight*; in particular, he experiments with the image quite frequently,

incorporating negative and solarized images, superimpositions, video feedback effects, black and white footage, as well as some stop-motion animation (as when a coffin starts moving around, which is another reference to Hanft and Beck's past musical history as Hanft had previously built a coffin for Beck to emerge out of when the band Loser played gigs).[12] The result is a playful video that consists of an abstract assemblage of footage featuring Beck in various situations (sometimes performing the vocals, other times goofing around or just strolling), of two women dancing, a coffin moving through different spaces, and other performers (such as the guitarist on the roof), as well as previously shot footage of Beck actually performing live and footage from *Kill the Moonlight* (though not extensive, there are a couple of stock car racing shots from the film in addition to Chance uttering the sampled dialogue). The result is a kind of goofy, self-deprecating, lo-fi surrealist collage, and links to some of the broader aesthetic tendencies evident across indie music videos in from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. Austerlitz, for example, has noted that many indie rock music videos in this period could commonly be distinguished from the more glossy, mainstream music videos that received heavy rotation on MTV. Austerlitz argues that many college rock bands had "constricted budgets" but often created interesting, minimalist videos: "Groups like R.E.M., the Cure, Depeche Mode, Black Flag, Hüsker Dü, and Sonic Youth turned a constraint into an aesthetic, crafting clips that were small, clever and cool."[13]

The 'Loser' video continued this lo-fi, low-budget trend but moved away from minimalism. Receiving heavy rotation on MTV it became a key music video related to the slacker generation and an important music video touchstone: Demopoulos, for example, has noted its innovative use of mixing different stock and argues that such experimental techniques found their way into feature films such as *Natural Born Killers* (Stone, 1994) and *He Got Game* (Lee, 1998).[14]

The stock car footage in *Kill the Moonlight*, though brief, is important, as cars and driving would become a frequent feature of Hanft's films and music videos. After directing Beck's 'Loser' he directed three more Beck music videos: the first two of these were Beck singles 'Beercan' and 'Pay No Mind (Snoozer)' which both, like 'Loser', were from his *Mellow Gold* (1994) album.[15] He also directed Beck's 'Where It's At', which was the first single from Beck's next album, *Odelay* (1996).[16] The first two of these continued the lo-fi, playful aesthetic of 'Loser', so that while Beck at this stage was now signed to a major label his videos and style nudged him into the alternative music category (or indie as it would more commonly be labelled over time). 'Where It's At' was slightly more polished than the earlier videos Hanft made for Beck, though is still quite modest in terms of budget and concept. Hanft also directed a number of other music videos between 1994 and the release of his second feature, *Southlander: Diary of a Desperate Musician* (2001), by acts including the Cure, Elliott Smith, Insane Clown Posse, Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, L7, and Primal Scream. While there are a large number of differences between these videos, there are also some connecting threads that point to Hanft's typical stylistic traits. These include, most typically, his play with different image textures, such as the following: using different film and video formats; combining colour and monochrome footage; frequent abstraction of the image, in particular the creation of abstract images via image manipulation and layering, or brief flash edits of abstract film, or even simulating film slipping in the projector (as in Primal Scream's 'Kowalski'). On a structural level, the music videos are characterized by thin narrative elements and/or surreal segments, usually mixed with performative footage from the music artist(s) involved. This, in itself, is quite common within the form; as Vernallis has argued, the form of the music video tends to work against the employment of detailed narratives so that narratives are rarely developed, even when they are employed.[17] In some of Hanft's videos, he uses other films as a touchstone; beyond referring to his own film

in early Beck videos, he has also referenced other films. Jon Spencer Blue's Explosion's 'Dang' (1994) recalls *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (Wood Jr., 1959) through containing cheap models of UFOs, resulting in a kind of thrift-shop sci-fi video.[18] Primal Scream's 'Kowalski', which references the main character from the film *Vanishing Point* (Sarafian, 1971), inevitably recalls that film through its lyrics.[19] Hanft creates a video around car chases and crime that recalls aspects of the film but also injects it with a gender twist as models Kate Moss and Devon Aoki drive around in a Dodge Challenger (also used in the film though the colour of the car is different) beating up men. Primal Scream would have likely chosen Hanft to direct a video based on an existentialist 70s road movie because he had directed a film harking back to 70s New Hollywood/independent road films. While still relatively low budget, Hanft's music videos did nevertheless become more structurally ordered and less fragmented, moving towards a more polished music video aesthetic, reflective of a slight shift in the indie music video as it became a more prominent staple of music television. While he certainly did not make a name for himself in the ways that more prominent directors working in this field did—including Spike Jonze, Mark Romanek and Michel Gondry—he nevertheless forged a distinctive style that would further influence his second feature, *Southlander*.

Southlander is informed by music culture to an even greater extent than *Kill the Moonlight*, including moments that seem heavily influenced by music videos. This is far from surprising considering that Hanft had not directed a music video prior to *Kill the Moonlight*, but had made a number before making *Southlander*. Like his first feature, *Southlander*'s narrative is quite slight and loose, but feels less indebted to the more arty, existentialist New Hollywood features. It is shot on video rather than film so that the surface look of the film feels different from *Kill the Moonlight* and many other independent and low budget Hollywood pictures, and closer to music videos which were more regularly shot on video.

The musical dimensions of his debut feature are extended in *Southlander*: the narrative actually concerns a musician, again named Chance (Rory Cochrane), attempting to obtain a 'Moletron' synthesizer in order to join a band. Music artists—mostly indie musicians based in L.A.—are again present on the soundtrack and within the film. The band in the film, Future Pigeon, are a fictional version of a real L.A. dub reggae band (the real Future Pigeon provide music for the film); this fictional version includes singer Rocket, who is played by British indie folk singer Beth Orton. The film also features cameos from music artists: Jennifer Herema, from Royal Trux and later of RTX and Black Bananas, portrays a record store clerk who chases Chance's friend Ross after he steals an item, all the while accompanied sonically by Royal Trux's 'End of the Century'; Elliott Smith briefly appears as a bus driver, and two of his tracks—'Snowbunny's Serenade' and 'Splitzville'—appear on the soundtrack; Hank Williams III appears as a character who steals Chance's keyboard and is filmed performing 'Alone and Dying' in his mobile home. The highest profile performer in the film is Beck, who at this time was an established music artist, albeit one still often positioned as an alternative/indie artist. Beck plays 'Bek', who sings a couple of tracks in the film, including a performance at Lane's (Gregg Henry) party. The film also features a performance by skate punk band Union 13, who perform in a mobile home when trying out an amp they are looking into buying. The choice of Richard Edson as an actor in the film—he plays Thomas, friend of music artist Motherchild (Lawrence Hilton-Jacobs, who is also a recording artist)—further links to music, as Edson was a member of post-punk bands Sonic Youth and KONK in the 1980s. That he made his name as an actor in Jim Jarmusch's seminal independent feature *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984) would have also been relevant as Hanft's features belong to a tradition of low-budget, DIY feature filmmaking based around a loose narrative.

In addition to featuring a number of musical artists in the film, as well as musical performances of acts rehearsing or playing live, *Southlander* contains a couple of sequences which feel like simulations of music videos. The first of these is when Ross—who states he cannot drink alcohol—is plied with booze by Motherchild (36:22). After Ross initially attempts to turn down the offer, he is confronted by an asserted threat to "drink." There follows a brief montage of doubly exposed street scene imagery filmed from the front of a moving vehicle and shot with a fish-eye lens, bordered by the windscreen (which creates a kind of iris effect, something Hanft often uses in his music videos) and set to a slow, dub track featuring a swirling glockenspiel motif and heavily echoed guitar stabs, which match the rather hazy nature of the images. This brief montage reflects both visually and sonically the addled nature of Ross's mental state and also marks the passing of the night, as the montage concludes on images at sunrise.

After another brief scene of Chance visiting an electronics store, we are then presented with a dream/fantasy sequence of Ross in a diner. We first see Ross at the bar of the diner with his face down in a plate of food, flanked by Thomas and Motherchild who are laughing at him Raising his face from the plate in a dazed state, he suddenly starts to get onto the diner bar to dance and mime to the music being played, a pop-inflected piece ('Piano Drop' by Ross Harris) (37:45). The waitresses soon start to dance and Thomas picks up a guitar—which seems to have magically appeared—from a table and throws it to Ross, who then continues to mime the instrument. When Ross jumps there is a match cut of him landing, but now the background has changed (38:00), thus emphasizing the dream-like nature of the clip. He is now placed against an obviously artificial composited backdrop of setting sun, sky and clouds, continuing to mime guitar and lip sync, but now adopting an exaggerated performance pose. In this clip, Ross's body multiplies into three (echoing Hanft's video for Beck's 'Where It's At') while he also appears playing drums; other

characters from the film—including Motherchild playing the Moletron synth—are also present at moments in the clip.

Insert Figures 1 and 2 here

Figures 1 and 2: (1) Ross jumps on to the bar with a guitar and starts to sing; (2) the landscape suddenly transforms and Ross multiplies into three figures

The second "music video moment" occurs when, following the theft of his Moletron, Chance is sitting by Lane's poolside having a drink with his friends. We see Chance preoccupied with his internal thoughts, separated from others at the table and accompanied by the sound of waves lapping on the shore. A slow dissolve into waves follows, briefly succeeded by a silhouetted shot of Chance and Rocket on the beach. The next cut (54:51) brings us to another sequence in which two layers are obviously composited: Chance is now dressed in a suit and playing a grand piano, while the back projection consists of abstract water patterns flecked by shimmering light. Rocket also appears and is lip syncing Beth Orton's own 'Sweetest Decline' whilst swimming. This (day) dream sequence reflects Chance's state of mind: he desires to play in the band and to be with Rocket, both of which might disappear if he cannot access the Moletron.

These two sequences both conform to some features that have been associated with music videos. Firstly, there is a sense of "polyvalent play" at work in these clips. Vernallis has written how "the editing in music videos loosens the representational functions that filmed images traditionally perform, opening them up to a sense of polyvalent play."[20] This is evident in these clips through the ways that artificial elements come to the fore in a heightened manner and transform rapidly, transcending any realist rules in the process. This nudges the clips towards surrealism in that objects, such as the guitar on the table, appear as

if by magic, while the environment fluidly changes in reaction to emotions. Both of these

musical dream sequences do relate to the film narrative to an extent—Ross's addled state,

Chance's romantic feelings for Rocket—but also seem to pull away from the narrative in

order to explore emotions in a musically heightened manner: the presence of characters

miming instruments, lip syncing, and other deliberately artificial elements such as the

obvious compositing in these video-esque segments, strengthen this musical dimension. As

such, these sequences encapsulate the idea of the "musical moment" in narrative films, as

outlined by Korsgaard (drawing on the work of Amy Herzog):

> the concept of the musical moment refers to those instants [sic] in feature films where
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> music takes on an independent role, liberating itself from its usual function of
>
> supporting the visuals and the narrative. In these cases music is actively foregrounded
>
> and assumes precedence over the images, sometimes also affecting the editing rhythm
>
> of the images.[21]

Whilst many of the previous musically influenced elements of Hanft's features can be

considered musical moments, these two sequences in *Southlander* are particularly heightened

examples.

Particularly, Hanft's music videos made for Beck are important contributions to the

indie rock music video of the 1990s. His low budget collages for Beck's early singles drew

on the amateurish lo-fi videos that characterised the 1980s, but inched them into more

playful, surreal directions through imaginative scenarios and an innovative approach to

mixing different stock. Importantly, he drew on some of the techniques when directing his

second feature film, *Southlander*, demonstrating the influence that music video production

had on his filmmaking. While Hanft continues to direct music videos, he does not do so to the

extent that he once did. My next focus is on a music video director who is more

13

representative of some shifts in music video and film production during the 2000s, in particular the turn to using digital production technologies.

Digital Delirium: Danny Perez

Like Steve Hanft, Danny Perez is a filmmaker who has made low budget music videos and independent films, but emerged at a later period than Hanft and is representative of a newer generation of music video and film directors. Both directors, though, have formed close alliances with particular musicians in their work, and both have a penchant for abstract imagery, rooting their work in a tradition of experimental media. Perez himself is most closely associated with musical acts Animal Collective and Black Dice. He started his visual work by performing live visuals for Black Dice and has also created some of their music videos, while he has made music videos for Animal Collective and collaborated with them on a visual album, *ODDSAC* (2010). He has also directed music videos for other artists including Blood on the Wall, Hot Chip, Kurt Vile, and Unknown Mortal Orchestra. Coming from a VJ background, his early work in music video was characterized by free-flowing, abstract digital imagery which, like Hanft's work, bore influential traces of previous experimental forms of filmmaking.

Whereas Hanft's work harks back to the slow drift of the more radical New Hollywood features and diaristic avant-garde shorts, many of Perez's music videos draw on visual music films, particularly the more psychedelic variety. Flowing digital abstractions— sometimes mixed with filmed imagery—characterised his visual accompaniments for videos such as Black Dice's 'Luveas' and Panda Bear's 'You Can Count On Me' and 'Alsatian Darn'.[22] These videos were very much extensions of the live visuals that he created for the respective artists (Panda Bear himself is a solo artist and also a member of Animal Collective). They recall the light shows associated with certain psychedelic acts of the late

1960s, which utilized slide projections, film and liquid effects (and later, in the 1970s, would use abstract video imagery): these include the Joshua Light Show's abstract live visuals for artists such as Frank Zappa and Janis Joplin, or Mark Boyle and Joan Hills' light shows for Pink Floyd and Soft Machine.[23] These abstract visual displays themselves were often inspired by innovative filmmakers such as John and James Whitney, and Jordan Belson; both James Whitney and Jordan Belson had works shown as part of the Vortex Concerts, live events which combined abstract film with music in live spaces at a series of performances at the Planetarium in San Francisco.[24] These filmmakers created films that were often termed psychedelic, or "visionary", in that some of their films were linked to altered states and spiritual experiences[25]: James Whitney's *Lapis* (1966), for example, features constantly evolving mandala patterns accompanied by a sitar raga, which invoked alternative forms of non-Western spirituality in vogue amongst psychedelic elements of the counterculture. The fluid, evolving patterns of the film would also have been conducive to viewing under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs, which were popular with the 1960s counterculture and often used to access non-normative states. The Whitney brothers, along with artists such as Stan Vanderbeek, were also important early adopters of computers and were pioneers in computer animation. Danny Perez can be linked to these precedents through his focus on largely abstract moving imagery, his synching of such visuals to music in an attempt to create immersive, synaesthetic audio-visual spectacles, and his creation of "psychedelic" imagery. His interest in the genre of horror, though, shifts the positive spirituality marking the 1960s abstract filmmakers onto a darker level. Perez's films do not feel so imbued with such spiritual urges, and are more likely to revel in disconcerting, sometimes grotesque, images.

Perez's earlier work largely dealt with completely abstract imagery which, in addition to drawing on previous abstract work, fitted in some ways into broader trends in low budget music videos and other content posted to YouTube. Vernallis, for example, mentions how

many recent indie music videos and YouTube video clips parade "technologically showy devices" such as "trails, kaleidoscopes, sinusoidal waves" while Korsgarad also mentions 'morphing, kaleidoscopic effects' as one common way that digital music videos have amplified a sense of visual polyphony.[26] While Perez continued to create colourful, abstract forms of digital animation, he did also begin to incorporate more live footage as well as elements of narrative in his music videos. The earliest example is his video for Animal Collective's 'Who Could Win a Rabbit' (2004), which is a take on the tortoise and hare fable (though in this case involving a rabbit rather than a hare), featuring members of the band dressed in a rabbit and tortoise costume respectively.[27] In the video, the rabbit and tortoise compete in a cycle race that descends into violence as the rabbit attempts to foil the tortoise by attacking him and burying him. It concludes with the tortoise eating the rabbit. The video image is low-resolution, linking it to a broader tradition of lo-fi indie music and visuals, and incorporates abstract imagery, stop-motion footage, jump cuts, and superimpositions. So, while the broad framing story is a linear, concrete narrative, this is interrupted and overlaid with abstract effects. At one point in the video, following a scene in which the tortoise falls from his bicycle, colourful hexagonal shapes (the same as on the tortoise's shell) are partially superimposed over the footage of the tortoise on the floor and reaction shots of the rabbit laughing (00:49). This method of abstracting more concrete images would become a key trait of Perez's later work. 'Who Could Win a Rabbit' also includes a number of elements that would become frequent staples of Perez's work: use of costumes and body paint; horror-influenced imagery; vibrant colours. This not only became a feature of Perez's video work but was also a key component of many Animal Collective (and related acts) videos.

Animal Collective's music often mixes child-like wonder with psychedelic and, occasionally, horrific vibes, and it is this component of their identity that has been particularly evident across a number of their videos. In addition to horror tropes that

16

occasionally feature in their music videos, they also share with Perez a penchant for

psychedelic imagery and a tendency to adopt costumes and masks. Perez's music videos for

Animal Collective's 'Summertime Clothes' (2009) and 'Today's Supernatural' (2012) both

contain masked figures, a very colourful, psychedelic palette, and combine these with visual

movements that frequently interlock with musical rhythms.[28] 'Summertime Clothes' features

dance troupe FLEX in a choreographed routine, some dressed in face-obscuring robes and

others dancing inside plastic balls. This choreography, in tandem with editing, flashing lights,

and fire and ice imagery, amounts to a very busy video in which physical movement,

colourful mise-en-scene and pulsing lights create a synaesthetic display. Perez here has

created a video very different from his purely abstract digital animations, but he still uses

more concrete elements here in an abstract manner, and therefore continues, albeit in

modified form, his interest in psychedelic and synaesthetic audio-vision.

     Perez's increasing incorporation of filmed, as opposed to animated, imagery, moved

his music videos away from being "absolute" in their abstraction. They remained, however,

imbued with abstract elements, such as psychedelic animation, increasingly sophisticated

lighting designs, and the tendency for a number of his videos to feature masked and/or

costumed performers. Some of them contain very small narrative moments, as though they

were brief film scenes plucked from their original context: an example would be his video for

Hot Chip's 'Look At Where We Are' (2012), which portrays a surgeon operating on a female

robot, and a fragment from a film rehearsal (with parallels between the director and the

surgeon).[29] The surgery itself, though, is surreal in that it involves opening the robot's face

and revealing shifting, digitally-rendered patterns (1:47), before it segues into the scene of an

actress under stress (2:05). The story itself is also far from straightforward, as testified by a

number of confused responses from people on YouTube. In many ways, this continues

Perez's intention to cognitively disrupt viewers' minds, but in this case it is mostly dependent

on taking a narrative situation and deliberately rendering it oblique, rather than solely through sensorial, psychedelic means.

ODDSAC, Perez's collaboration with Animal Collective, was a visual album and his longest film to date at just under an hour. Its main difference from a typical music video, apart from its length, is that Perez and Animal Collective produced the visual and musical aspects of the film in collaboration (while there was no corresponding music-only release). This allowed for musical ideas to influence moving images and vice versa, enabling a greater conceptual fit between the two tracks. Following Perez's previous video work, the film once again works to produce an immersive, synaesthetic audio-visual experience. It also continues his (and Animal Collective's) interest in horror tropes, as well as an emphasis on natural landscapes and psychedelic imagery.[30] The narrative elements of the film are more developed in this film than in his previous music videos, but this is largely because the greater length of the piece produces more room for development. In terms of narrative clarity, it is still very obtuse. The film comprises a series of loosely connected sections which contain elements of narrative progression—recurring figures and environments can be mapped out—but these are very "open" in their signification: while all narratives are open to an extent (in that even a simple and concretely straightforward narrative can be subject to differing interpretations), *ODDSAC* exists at the further end of such openness. It is a narrative that requires active decoding by an audience, one that may require re-viewing. As argued by Sean Matharoo the film "warrants multiple viewings, encouraging an enthusiastic audience to revisit it, read it closely and thus develop a personalized attachment to it."[31] Narrative comprehension of *ODDSAC* may also be thwarted by its affective dimensions, resulting from its synaesthetic, psychedelic nature. Matharoo stresses how its "non-representational assemblage of competing elements… operate to disorient and challenge spectators."[32]

Insert Figures 3 and 4 here

Figures 3 and 4: A masked character ('Mr Fingers') produces delirious abstractions with fire (06:36)

Perez's first feature film, *Antibirth*, while featuring many stylistic and thematic tropes evident in his previous work, is structured more conventionally. It is a narrative feature film, even though the narrative is not always easy to follow. This is partly because we experience the narrative via the subjective disorientation of the main character, Lou (Natasha Lyonne), who imbibes prodigious quantities of drugs and alcohol. Her self-medicated delirium is further heightened as the film progresses and is accompanied by strange physical transformations such as flaking pieces of flesh and an unaccounted pregnancy. The film can be placed in the category of "body horror" as it focuses on the horrific, unwanted transmogrification of subjective flesh. *Antibirth* continues Perez's interest in horror, especially in grotesque imagery, and also incorporates aspects prevalent across his previous work such as heavy use of neon colours and surrealist sequences. Surrealist sequences are, though, used reasonably sparingly and are partially subordinated to the predominant, linear narrative. They are also linked to narrative in the sense that they are often composed of Lou's distorted, mangled memory flashbacks. They do not, however, form into complete, meaningful flashbacks that offer total explanations, remaining too indistinct and vague.

Insert Figure 5 here

Figure 5: Lou gives birth to an alien head in *Antibirth* (1:20:06)

Continuities between Perez's music video work and this feature film are also evident on the soundtrack to *Antibirth*. The soundtrack features a throbbing electronic score by Eric Copeland (of Black Dice) and Jonathan J.K. Kanakis, and also features Black Dice and other

19

Copeland tracks, a specially recorded interlude by Avey Tare (of Animal Collective), and a range of post-punk and indie music by acts such as Suicide and Black Lips. Not only does the soundtrack feature musicians that Perez has previously worked with, it is also a very persistent presence. While the film does not feature simulations of music video clips in the way *Southlander* does, music nevertheless is present—often as underscore—for a large duration of the film and on many occasions comes to the fore more powerfully. Further stylistic and thematic connections between this film and some of Perez's previous work are apparent, including his use of a vibrantly colourful palette: even though the majority of the film is set at night time, darkness is illuminated by neon lighting and images being transmitted from television sets. Other elements appearing in his music videos, such as masks and grotesque bodies, also appear in *Antibirth*. Grotesquerie is obviously a key part of a film that belongs to the body horror genre: *Antibirth* features a woman with a caved in mouth and a major character who undergoes severe bodily transformations, eventually birthing an alien monster. Masks and costumes also make an appearance in the film through the location of the Funhouse, a children's entertainment centre and eatery where staff are dressed in furry outfits that include slightly creepy facial masks.

The narrative of *Antibirth* is partly difficult to fully comprehend because the film proceeds through a series of scenes that often seem disconnected; even though most scenes *are* connected, the narration contains gaps that audio-viewers are likely to have to struggle to actively piece together. This strategy may be considered—as it often was in the frequent negative reviews the film received—as a music video director struggling to adopt to the demands and conventions of a narrative feature. There may be some truth to this, but it can also be related to how Perez wants us to share Lou's often confused and addled state. The film does, after all, commence with a scene of disorientation, showing Lou at a party and eventually being dragged away by a male. The use of slow motion and flash-frame edits

20

towards the end of the scene (accompanied by glitch-like sound fragments) indicate that something has gone wrong, but what has happened is not at all clear. The segmented narration is related to her hazy mental state: it is sometimes interrupted by a hallucinogenic dream sequence or splintered memories, but even when not its development feels somewhat fragmented.

The musical moments of *Antibirth* are most evident in the flashback and hallucinatory scenes when music dominates the soundtrack and Perez plays around with fragmented, often horrific, images, in which neon colours are heightened to produce a delirious, nightmarish atmosphere. Yet a musical rhythm also runs through the film and, in the absence of a strong, coherent narrative structure provides a degree of fluidity. In particular, scenes are often connected through music-heavy interludes: most commonly, this is through recurring shots of Lou driving in a car, usually with her friend Sadie (Chloë Sevigny), though there are occasions when close ups of television imagery also act as transitional segue points. Both driving and televisual transitions are abstracted: the driving scenes are usually accompanied by an overlaid series of geometric globules slowly raining down the screen, whilst the television images are distorted through quite heavy reception interference. Such abstractions lend a warped perspective to the scenes, reflecting not only Lou's disoriented subjectivity but also the general environment in which she exists, peopled as it is by drug addicts, crooks, and crazed experiments.

Indie, Technology, History

These two case studies have outlined the main stylistic traits of Hanft and Perez, as well as the connections between their music video work and feature films, but I now want to think about how their work relates to broader trends. Firstly, to what extent does their work reflect some of the typical traits that recur across indie music videos? A straightforward answer to

21

this question is difficult because of a number of factors, including the sheer scope of music that has been referred to as 'indie', including a number of sub-generic categories, music made on varying budgets, and changes—technological, cultural, social—over time.

Hanft's music videos represent a resolutely lo-fi aesthetic that is found in many indie videos, particularly low budget ones from the late 1980s and 1990s. Drawing on home movies, avant-garde films and independent feature films, they often draw attention to their own artificiality through a range of techniques, including frequent changes of image (e.g. use of solarized, negative and monochrome images), use of irises, shifts to slow-motion, and stop-motion animation. They are often playfully experimental and range from surrealist-like collages of seemingly unrelated situations (e.g. 'Loser') to thin, oblique narratives harking back to previous cinematic touchstones (e.g. 'Vanishing Point').

Danny Perez started to produce music videos during a slightly later period, in the 2000s, and his work partially reflects the contextual shifts that have occurred since the turn of the millennium, which include the increased consumption of music videos on the web and the rise of affordable, digital technologies. His work also connects to some general shifts within indie cultures over the years, in particularly an embrace of the horror genre as its status as an "illegitimate genre" has softened, as well as a broadening of the range and types of music associated with indie: in particular, a greater sense of generic openness within indie cultures (partly related to the sheer wealth of music available to people so that they can freely explore other genres) and a more enthusiastic embrace of electronic sounds. Steve Hanft's work, though, already demonstrated an eclectic palette in *Southlander*, which featured a range of different generic styles of music that were linked together by artists who were independent (with the exception of Beck, who was nevertheless generally still appealing to indie audiences around this stage). Harking back to previous examples of 'visual music', much of Perez's earlier music video work was marked by digital abstraction, in which patterned

22

shapes transform and evolve as if in response to musical rhythm and texture. Generally, digital technologies are importantly linked to the rise of animated work as they have enabled the automation of many laborious aspects of animation production and made it easier to synchronize images and sounds with more precision. Combined with the decreasing prices of computers and associated software, this has led to a greater array of people dabbling creatively with animation techniques.

These case studies can also be linked to questions around the influence of music video on feature filmmaking more broadly, and within the indie film sector more specifically. At a more general level, these two case studies certainly indicate such an influence. It does, though, seem that we need to take account of Korsgaard's caution about making any definitive statements about such influences. Certainly, elements of Hanft's and Perez's features demonstrate such an influence through the prominence music assumes on the respective soundtracks of their features, including frequent musical moments, as well as stylistic continuities between their music videos and features. There are evident, however, influences from other works apparent in these, and many other, feature films, including other feature films, experimental shorts, documentaries, YouTube videos, and advertisements, to name just a few. And such influences might be prominent in some films, partial or non-existent in others. In my case studies Hanft's *Southlander* is most influenced by music video aesthetics: that it evidences more of a music video aesthetic than his previous film, *Kill the Moonlight*, may be explained by Hanft becoming involved in music video production after releasing his first film. A further possible factor is that Hanft made his second feature on digital video rather than film, which would have enabled him to create the composite music video images with more ease.

Not all music video directors incorporate such aesthetics into their feature films to this extent. While Perez, as demonstrated, evidences elements of his music video work in his first

feature *Antibirth*, he also tones down many of the more outré elements that characterized

such work. At the higher budgeted end of indie feature film production, the work of Jonathan

Dayton and Valerie Faris demonstrates that directors who have come from music video (and,

in Dayton and Faris's case, advertisements and music television) may not evidence any

particularly perceptible influence. Other directors at the higher end of indie feature

filmmaking might veer between making features which demonstrate a substantial music

video influence and films that do not. An example is Sofia Coppola, whose *Lost in*

Translation (2003) and *Mary Antoinette* (2006) seem infused with music video influences but

whose most recent feature, *The Beguiled* (2013)*,* does not.

Finally, these case studies can be linked more specifically to overlaps between indie

music and indie film, which have been increasing in recent years (see Sexton, 2016). Indie

music has been featuring in more filmmaking generally, though it is within indie filmmaking,

both in lower budgeted varieties and higher budgeted, studio-backed examples, that indie

music has become licensed more frequently. One explanation of this trend is the commercial,

marketing value of indie. In an age where there is so much choice in terms of available

media, indie becomes more important as a strategy to target particular audiences, as testified

by its use as a genre-like category on numerous film and music streaming sites. Indie artists

are now more likely to use film—in addition to other media—as a means to earn extra

revenue in an age of dwindling sales of music releases and to expose their music to new

audiences.[33] Another reason feeding this trend is the idea of cultural congruence: directors

and other creative personnel who make indie films are often likely to have tastes in other

indie media, and may also be committed to an indie ethos. Hence the many film directors

who have also been involved in other types of indie media, particularly evident in the area of

music videos, but also apparent in other forms of production. Indie film director Mike Mills,

for example, has not only directed music videos but has also designed record covers for indie

bands: for example, he has designed covers for Buffalo Daughter, Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, and Sonic Youth amongst others.[34] As mentioned, Faris and Dayton have been involved not just in directing music videos and advertisements, but were also involved in music television, having directed MTV's seminal indie/alternative slot *The Cutting Edge* (1983-7). Many indie filmmakers, including Mills, are also involved in producing and/or directing live music films and/or music documentaries: Steve Hanft himself directed a documentary on Elliott Smith, *Strange Parallel* (1998). This is not to claim that such directors will limit themselves to working in and with different forms of indie media, but rather indicates that it might well be a dominant factor of a director's profile.

Conclusion

The above-mentioned trends should alert us to significant trends and developments. Firstly, the rise of music's (moving) visualisation—for example its increased documentation, both official and unofficial, its continuing importance within filmmaking, and renaissance of music videos, including user-generated music videos—has inevitably impacted on the realms of indie/alternative music. Fabian Holt has noted an increased visualisation of music generally, which he also sees as particularly evident within indie music.[35] While there has always been a visual dimension to aspects of indie music cultures, as noted there was a reluctance amongst some indie artists to engage in music videos in the 1980s. This has now certainly changed: not only are indie music videos prevalent on indie-oriented websites, but indie music is increasingly sourced to accompany moving images whether feature films, television, or web-based videos. Documentation of indie live gigs and documentaries on indie music has also grown. By looking at a number of such moving visuals, we can begin to chart some conventions and tropes associated with indie music's audio-visual dimensions, some of which I have identified within the two case studies covered in this chapter. Any generalised

points must, however, be tempered by the fact that they can only partially illuminate the whole picture, for they are always inflected by other factors including specific filmmakers' and music artists' style and temperament, and contexts of production.

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Notes

[1] See Tim Anderson, "The Melodramatic Mode of Sofia Coppola," in *Popular Music and the New Auteur: Visionary Filmmakers After MTV,* edited by Arved Ashby (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 63-83; James Annesley, "Being Spike Jonze: Intertextuality and Convergence in Film, Music Video and Advertising," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 11, no. 1 (2013): 23-37; and Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video and the New Digital Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[2] Vernallis, *Unruly Media*, 36.

[3] Vernallis, *Unruly Media*, 40. John Richardson has also reflected on music video's influence on a range of films, contending that its influence has led to new aesthetic traits such as greater attention to audiovisual flow (implying repetition), narrative fragmentation, microrhythmic and microvisual detail, and surrealist juxtapositions. Richardson *An Eye for Music: Popular Music and the Audiovisual Surreal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 92.

[4] Mathias Bonde Korsgaard, *Music Video After MTV: Audiovisual Studies, New Media, and Popular Music* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2017), 150.

[5] Korsgaard *Music Video After MTV*, 145.

[6] I will not focus on his third feature, *Averageman* (2012) as it has been difficult to locate a copy of the film.

[7] In Steve Hanft interview, *Kill the Moonlight* (Plexifilm DVD, 2006).

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Steven Shaviro, *Digital Music Videos.* New Brunswick (Rutgers University Press, 2017), 8.

[11] Beck, "Loser," *YouTube* video, 3:53, official music video, directed by Steve Hanft, posted by Beck, October 7, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgSPaXgAdzE.

[12] Steve Hanft, liner notes, *Kill the Moonlight* (Plexifilm DVD, 2006). I should note that in the liner notes Hanft refers to the band he was in with Beck as Loser, but in the interview with Hanft on the DVD extras, he refers to the band's name as Liquor Cabinet. I have not been able to ascertain which was correct (or whether they changed names) as information is scarce and the band did not officially release any records.

[13] Austerlitz, Saul. *Money for Nothing: A History of the Music Video from the Beatles to the White Stripes* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), 70. College rock was a term used frequently in the 1980s in the US but gradually fell out of use. Much of the music would have been called indie in the UK at the time.

[14] Maria Demopoulos, "Blink of an Eye: Filmmaking in the Age of Bullet Time." *Film Comment* 36, no. 3 (May/June, 2000): 34-39.

[15] Beck, "Beercan,", *YouTube* video, 3:58, official music video, directed by Steve Hanft, posted by Beck, October 7, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVay-RfNGv8; Beck, "Pay No Mind (Snoozer)," *YouTube* video, 3:13, official music video, directed by Steve Hanft, posted by Beck, October 7, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHjjqYQpBQg.

[16] Beck, "Where It's At," *YouTube* video, 3:31, official music video, directed by Steve Hanft, posted by Beck, October 6, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPfmNxKLDG4.

[17] Carol Vernallis,. *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 13-20.

[18] Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, "Dang," *YouTube* video, 1:56, official music video, directed by

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fQY7uFTfVI.

[19] Primal Scream, "Kowalski," *YouTube* video, 4:18, official music video, directed by Steve

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xBzYsE4y1k.

[20] Carol Vernallis, "Strange People, Weird Objects: The Nature of Narrativity, Character and

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edited by Jason Middleton and Roger Beebe (Durham & London: Duke University Press,

2007), 111-151.

[21] Korsgaard, *Music Video After MTV*, 154.

[22] Panda Bear, "You Can Count On Me," *YouTube* video, 2:23, official music video, directed by

Danny Perez, posted by Paw Tracks Records, December 19, 2011,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoOv1tyWHe0. Black Dice's "Luveas" music video is

not currently on YouTube.

[23] Kerry Brougher, "Visual-Music Culture," in *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music

Since 1900,* edited by Kerry Brougher, Jeremy Strick, Ari Wiseman, and Judith Zilcer

(London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 155-161.

[24] Aimee Mollaghan, *The Visual Music Film.* Basingstoke (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 73.

[25] P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* (New York: Oxford University

Press, 1974).

[26] Vernallis, *Unruly Media*, 36; Korsgaard, *Music Video After MTV*, 92.

[27] Animal Collective, "Who Could Win a Rabbit?," *YouTube* Video, 2:25, official music video,

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[28] Animal Collective, "Summertime Clothes," *YouTube* video, 4:30, official music video, directed by Danny Perez, posted by Domino Recording Company, 10 June 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxhaRgJUMl8; Animal Collective, "Today's Supernatural," *YouTube* video, 3:47, official music video, directed by Danny Perez, posted by Domino Recording Company, August 15, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47xbkT3calM.

[29] Hot Chip, "Look At Where We Are," *YouTube* Video, 4:09, official music video, directed by Danny Perez, posted by "Creators", 17 July 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZgUOiwOuC0.

[30] While Animal Collective's horror influences aren't hugely marked in their music, their music does occasionally explore, or refer to, discomfort and dread, as in their track 'Panic' (from the 2003 album *Here Comes the Indian*). It is more explicitly referenced through their videos (not only those directed by Perez, but also in other videos such as 'Peacebone', which features a romance between a monstrous creature and a young women) and other references: Avey Tare, the band's main singer, named his spin-off group Avey Tare's Slasher Flicks, for example, while he programmed a film day for the AV club (Dowd 2014) which included horror films such as *Deranged* (Gillen, Ormsby, 1974), *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978), *Possession* (Zulawski, 1981), and *Dead Ringers* (Cronenberg, 1988).

[31] Sean Matharoo, "'A Weird Creature That's Operating in the Theater': Cult, Synaesthesia and the Ethico-Politics of Horror in Danny Perez and Animal Collective's *ODDSAC*." *Horror Studies* vol. 7, no. 2 (2016): 275-91.

[32] Matharoo, "A Weird Creature That's Operating in the Theater": 279.

[33] See Bethany Klein, *As Heard on TV: Popular Music in Advertising*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009.

[34] Danny Perez has recently added album design to his own portfolio, having created the cover design for Panda Bear's album *Buoys* (2019).

[35] Fabian Holt, "Is Music Becoming More Visual? Online Video Content in the Music Industry." *Visual Studies* vol. 26, no. 1 (2011): 51.