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New Directions in Music Video: Vincent Moon and the 'ascetic aesthetic'

Abstract:

This article takes the form of a case study on the work of French filmmaker and music video director Vincent Moon, and his 'Takeaway Shows' at the video podcast site *La Blogothèque*. This discussion examines the state, and status, of music video as a dynamic mode of convergent screen media today. It is argued that the recent shift of music video online represents a revival of music video—its form and aesthetics—together with a rejuvenation of music video scholarship. The emergence of the 'ascetic aesthetic' is offered as a new paradigm for music video far removed from that of the postmodern MTV model. In this context, new music video production intersects with notions of immediacy, authenticity and globalised film practice. Here, convergent music video is enabled by the network of Web 2.0 and facilitated by the trend towards amateur content, participatory media and Creative Commons licensing. The pedagogical implications of teaching new music video within screen media arts curricula is highlighted as a trajectory of this research.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Aesthetics - Music - Video - Vincent Moon

The focus of this article is the work of French filmmaker and music video director Mathieu Saura, more commonly known by his alias 'Vincent Moon'. Saura is best known for his music videos at La Blogothèque, a video podcast site developed with web producer Christophe Abric (aka 'Chryde'). The site features over two hundred live music videos amassed since 2006, gaining more than a million views online (Danigelis 2009). The music video archive is collectively titled 'The Takeaway Shows' (Les Concerts à Emporter). This article investigates the work of Vincent Moon to discuss the state, and status, of music video in the age of media convergence. More specifically, it examines the recent trend towards an 'ascetic aesthetic' for new music video. This discussion prioritizes three interrelated concepts, from the discourse of convergent screen media: the defining features of new digital cinema, the precession of clip-culture online and the revival of amateur production in the context of an activated 'participatory culture' (Jenkins 2008). In addition, the significance of the Creative Commons framework and the potential for globalised film practice will be highlighted in relation to the work of Vincent Moon. It will be argued that the trend towards the 'ascetic aesthetic' in new music video is enabled precisely by the operation of these factors within the architecture of Web 2.0. With a focus on globalised music video practices, inspired by Vincent Moon, the intention here is to stimulate a reconsideration of the pedagogical aspects of current teaching of music video production within Australian universities as an interlinked node of research in this field of screen media arts.

The first task at hand is to provide an overview of music video scholarship to date and assess its current status. It is some thirty years since the inception of the MTV network in 1981, with strong evidence that speaks to the decay of music video on television—a format that has now officially entered its 'classic' phase. In May 2010, MTV Networks Australia launched 'MTV Classic' as a new 24-hour subscription TV channel. According to MTV, the Classic channel (which supersedes VH1) is designed to be complimentary to the flagship MTV channel whilst squarely 'aimed at 25-40 year old Australian music lovers' with content drawn from the MTV back catalogue 'from the 80s to the 00s' (Stanley 2010). Brand-speak aside, the subtext here is that music video, on television, is being abandoned for the current youth generation of 'digital natives' acutely engaged with online media. According to MTV's logic, 25 to 40 year olds are set to remain frozen in the televisual archives of music video whilst the attention, and resources, of the network shift online to capture the 'I want it now' generation. Symbolically, this transformation is marked by the redesign of the MTV brand logo (also thirty years old), which drops the text tagline 'music television' altogether. On this, MTV says 'the (rejuvenated) logo is part of MTV's re-invention to connect with today's millennial generation and bring them in as part of the channel' (Stanley 2010). Here, the 'legacy media' play catch up. Their MTV.com portal has steadily increased its database of music videos digitized from the MTV catalogue.

Whilst this article takes the dissemination of music video online as its key context, it disavows the pronouncement of the death of music video television in a global context since a vast 'proliferation of music video channels' still operate successfully within a global television context—notably outside the west (Beebe and Middleton

2007: 2). However, it is apt to say that music video scholarship has remained somewhat stagnant over the last decade, particularly since the mid 2000s. The seminal text of the 1990s proved to be *The Music Video Reader* (1993), considered to be the 'canon for teaching and scholarship' (Beebe and Middleton 2007: 4). This edited volume was heavily influenced by analysis driven by the trend towards postmodern theory. Subsequently, music video scholarship embraced the notion of auteurism within the form, focusing on a small set of directors including Spike Jonze, Chris Cunningham, Jonathon Glazer and Michel Gondry. The evidence of 'MTV autuerism' was cited in relation to the inclusion of 'Director' credit in the form of a text super over the start/end of music videos, together with the popularity of MTV's 'Top 50' and 'Top 10' music video lists, where the repeat success of individual directors was most visible (2007: 303). The appeal of the 'Director's Label' DVD series supports this view. The discourse based around auteurism represents the final word on televisual music video analysis to date.

In the post-broadcast era of screen media arts the phenomenon of convergence is defined as a 'dispersal and decentralization' of media production, distribution and consumption across new technologies and platforms (Cohen, Salazar and Barkat 2008: 357). In new music video, convergence is evident in the shift from television to online and dispersal of clips across social media networks, mobile media platforms and devices. The viral spread of music video on portals such as YouTube and Vimeo is consistent with 'the rise of clip culture' online (Geist 2007). More precisely, the music video form (a short video between three and four minutes in duration) is one ideally positioned to the new mediascape. Music video theorists Beebe and Middleton note the close fit between the music video form and current internet technology:

The increasing availability of broadband coupled with the difficulty of streaming longer videos through the current Internet technology has been a real boon for short films and video generally, and the vast storehouse of music video has frequently been called upon to provide content for streaming or quick downloads. Given the rapid development of technology, music video has seen a tremendous explosion beyond the narrow limits of 'music television' (2007: 3).

In his book, *Money for Nothing: A History of the Music Video from the Beatles to the White Stripes*, Saul Austerlitz describes the dearth of music video programming in the 1990s (particularly in prime time) and notes its replacement by alternative modes of programming, Reality TV and game show media (2008: 1). It is no surprise that Austerlitz's findings correlate with the demise of scholarship in the field since this time. Furthermore, in Austerlitz's text the transformation in music video production, consumption and distribution—to online—reads as an epitaph. It is only in his 'Afterward' that this fundamental shift is noted. He writes, 'the music video did not die; it merely mutated, onto a new host: the Internet' (2008: 221). Saying this, he makes two important points. First, that the economics of music video production has undergone a radical shift from an expensive, high-production values form to one 'impressively cheap, flexible and omnipresent'; and second, that the status of the music video today has regained a degree of 'underground cachet' in the online world (2008: 222).

Enter Mathieu Saura as 'Vincent Moon', (I will refer to him as such). Moon describes himself as a 'passuer ... a link, a connexion (sic), a bridge between people, sounds, cultures maybe' (2010). He was born in Paris in 1979, and studied photography prior to developing a music video career, of sorts. On his website, he cites the film *Step Across the Border* (1990)—a music documentary on Fred Frith (the English avant garde musician)—as a key motivation for his engagement with music and the moving image. This reference provides a clue to his unconventional approach to music video production undertaken at *La Blogothèque*. The Takeaway Shows feature high profile, often independent bands, including Bon Iver, Stephen Malkmus, Arcade Fire, The Shins, Sufjan Stevens and many more. It is clearly a project informed by Moon's own musical taste towards melody based, stripped down, folk-pop style music, drawn from the 'indie' catalogue. He frames his work in music video via an intuitive, personal viewpoint, one far removed from the mechanics of mainstream music video production (often financed by record labels).

I just hate, hate music videos. I just think it's a terrible way to represent music, it's not even about the music anymore. I really tried to do something much more cutting edge with musicians. I approached all the bands I loved and didn't really ask them what they wanted to do. I would just start shooting. So it would be before or after a show, when they were all in a rush. It's more exciting to keep things improvised. We were like, 'Let's do it over there. Let's see what will happen, if someone in the background is going to scream or start dancing!' (in Beckett 2010).

The aesthetic dimension of The Takeaway Shows is far removed from traditional expectations of the form. Typically, music video is marked by its kineticism, driven by fast paced montage where moving images are spliced to the beat of a pop/rock track every second or so. In screen theory, the term 'MTV Model' has been used to identify film directors who exploit rapid editing patterns cut to popular music tracks, for example, Oliver Stone and Baz Luhrmann (Dancyger 2001: 132). In contrast, Vincent Moon disregards the accepted language of music video and opts instead for a single take of a musical performance captured in a public space. His live 'sets' range from claustrophobic locations (for example, set in an elevator) to the use of tongue-incheek Parisian tourist traps (say the court of the Eiffel Tower or a sight-seeing tourist bus). In lieu of constructing a music video by editing (cutting between one camera angle to the next) Moon wields a prosumer digital video camera fluidly to find shot sizes on the move. He says of the bands, 'they get instruments in their hand and I've got a camera so they play guitar and I play camera, in a way' (qtd. in Thomson 2008). The videos are highly improvised and deliberately filmed in the moment in order to capture the immediacy of live performance. Once again, this approach stands in opposition to the preferred industry practice of methodically planned and executed music video productions, which rely upon developed Treatments (screenwriting proposals) and mapping out of intensive pre-production and production schedules. Moon uses recurring motifs as his signature in music video online. He works his single take strategy by commencing on a close-up or cutaway and then zooming out to reveal the band in a wider shot. His use of typography marks his videos with a Takeaway Show number and band identification. This is rendered in large, bold,

white fonts as title cards. This can be read as an idiosyncratic variation of the typical marketing data 'burnt' over the start of music video television.

Another transformation in Vincent Moon's work is his conjoining of a series of (generally two or three) music videos per Takeaway Show. This strategy negates the conventional focus in music video production for the track most likely to become a radio broadcast single. Furthermore, this reinforces that trend in media convergence towards a multiplication of media. The logical extension of this is the completion of the 'visual album' where a music video for each track of an album is bundled online—Moon has done this for Lulacruza. The most distinctive aspect of his work is the preference for a live sound recording of the track in question to accompany the moving image. And this represents his most radical departure from mainstream music video production whereby screen performance is typically mimed to the CD track for the purpose of post-production syncing (see Fraser 2005: 68). In this light, the Takeaway Shows afford new versions of popular songs to match the immediacy of the moving image aesthetic described prior. As such, across both image and sound, Moon's Takeaway Shows hail the new 'ascetic aesthetic' in music video, that has inspired others working in this domain such as 'VPRO 3VOOR12' (in the Netherlands) and 'Shoot The Player' (an Australian incarnation of The Takeaway Shows). These collectives acknowledge the work of Vincent Moon as their prime inspiration for online music projects that 'seek to capture the intimacy and energy of live performance' (Tovey and Wald 2010).

The presence of the ascetic aesthetic in music video can also be evaluated in relation to other modes of new digital cinema that pursue immediacy and build upon the tradition of authenticity within rock culture. Specifically, Moon's Takeaway Shows connect with the notion of 'DV Realism' advocated by media theorist Lev Manovich. This links digital filmmaking to the allied *cinéma vérité* style film practices of the mid-twentieth century, driven by 'immediacy' (2002: 212). Holly Willis concurs with this finding, noting that new digital cinema (including music video) often speaks to 'much deeper, often elided roots' (2005: 22). In terms of new music video, the shift to immediacy speaks to the elevation of process-orientated investigation into the form. Moon says, 'the results are the videos, but the videos are not the point'—it is clearly the creative process that drives his work. He expands, 'I'm not really into perfect things in their final form so when we were filming I tried to be very honest with who I am and just try to catch the rhythm of the song and be there on the same level with them' (qtd. in Thompson 2008). Moreover, the immediacy apparent in The Takeaway Shows is made possible through the increasing miniaturization of high definition moving image apparatuses that facilitate new modes of guerilla based filmmaking. Moon's exploitation of public space is a key tactic here. In his digital toolkit, Moon opts for a prosumer digital video camera together with a set of wireless microphones for sound recording. This small-scale production ethos is central to his work, described here at length:

I film mostly those days with the Panasonic 171, on which I use a shotgun mic. I record sounds separately using a 4-track recorder, on which I plug from 1 to 4 standard Sennheiser wireless transmitters, using different laveliers, Sanken or Tram. I also use

one or two ambient mics if possible on the 4-track, an omni directional and an ultra directional being a perfect deal. I often add to all this another isolated small recorder, the Zoom H2 being really cheap and good stuff. I then work on final cut pro all of my edits, and even do the color corrections in it. I would advise Compressor to compress the videos then, and of course the wonderful Vimeo website to host them on the web (Moon 2010).

Vincent Moon's reference to digital color grading is interesting too. It reveals a hybrid digital aesthetic at work that has a 'retro' element, seen in the use of vintage film stocks (a trend seen today in the popularity of the 'Hipstamatic' iPhone application, which generates Polaroid-style digital still photography). In his music video work Moon opts for a high contrast image (akin to 16mm celluloid) that emphasizes the warmer color palette towards the yellows and red spectrum. The result is a video image rendered with a filmic, or 'cine', aesthetic. Moon's preference for the Vimeo compression codec (over say that of YouTube) adds to the filmic quality. In summary, the pared down digital toolkit described above affords a micro scale of production and facilitates a fast turnaround from production (shooting) to post-production (edit and color grade), followed by distribution online. It is this scale of music video production that has enabled Moon to be mobile and render The Takeaway Shows a global phenomenon.

The question of authenticity in music video is a contested domain in contemporary scholarship. Lawrence Grossberg argues that the 'ideology of authenticity' in music video (as it relates to rock culture) is transformed, to the point of irrelevance within the media economy of MTV. He argues that in mainstream music television, 'style is celebrated over authenticity' when bands lip-sync their own songs in 'highly mediated' performances dominated by visual excess of the moving image (1993: 205). For Grossberg, the displacement of authenticity from music video is aligned with a postmodern televisual culture marked by ironic cynicism (1993: 204). Grossberg makes the point that 'the authenticity of rock has always been measured by its sound and, most commonly, its voice'—an observation which prompts a reading of The Takeaway Shows on the grounds of an authenticity delivered via vocal recordings of the bands (1993: 204). A seminal aspect of the ascetic aesthetic in online music video is the negotiation of risk outside the safety of a studio or mimed performance. Its success lies in the ability of Moon to solicit unproduced voice recordings from high profile artists. A good example is the video that features Bloc Party ('This Modern Love'). This particular Takeaway Show includes dialogue prior to the song, where Moon is overheard persuading a reluctant Kele Okereke (the lead vocalist) to perform an acoustic version of the song standing on the footpath outside a busy pub. The web producer at *La Blogothèque* reflects:

We'd been told it would not be easy. A year before, we already tried to set up a Takeaway Show with them in London, with the support of JD Beauvallet, but nothing could convince them. They never play acoustic. They're very shy. It's impossible. So, back in the present, on October 14th, we tried harder. He caught us off-guard. Everyone was speechless. There's nothing more to add. Five minutes of rare sincerity, two artists doing something with no safety net and without really understanding why. They took

that risk, and we thank them for it (Abric 2008).

So, if for Grossberg, 'the importance of live performances lies precisely in the fact that it is only here that one can see the actual production of sound, and the emotional work carried in the voice' (1993: 204) then it can be argued that The Takeaway Shows foreground a return to authenticity within rock culture driven by new music video. This phenomenon has the capacity to transform the status of the music video, as an authentic mode of media production that attempts to realign (via Grossberg) the 'ratio between sound and vision' in the contemporary music video and overturn the fact the condition whereby 'the visual increasingly speaks for, or even in place of the musical' (1993: 186). Vincent Moon's commitment to live sound recording attempts to engage with the 'ideology of authenticity' in rock culture and present a new paradigm for music video far removed the postmodern MTV model.

The question of authenticity also connects with the rise of amateur and user-generated media witnessed across Web 2.0. In his biography on VincentMoon.com he describes his stance as, 'fighting against the idea of professionalism and trying to develop work without money engaged, involving local creators as much as possible, dealing with the new notion of amateurism in the 21st century' (2010). This reflects the rise of the amateur in new digital media as outlined by media theorist Kate Crawford in her book Adult Themes (2006). Crawford links new media experiments with a re-imagining of amateur media-making that she calls the rise of 'a mass culture of amateurs', which marks a 'small revolution in the context of the last hundred years of cultural production' (2006: 214-215). Crawford cites various examples of 'emerging forms of creativity' including remix workshops, guerilla marketing campaigns and the expansion of the blogosphere. The Takeaway Shows from Vincent Moon also deserve a place on this list. For Crawford, there exists potential for new digital media makers to hijack forms from mainstream culture (like music video) and invest them with new meanings by developing 'idiosyncratic narratives' based around their own creative lives. And this is true for Vincent Moon, whose work at The Takeaway Shows has propelled him on a global musical road trip of sorts, seeking out new music/film projects in Tanzania, Japan, Chile and Argentina as part of his follow up online project called *Temporary Areas*. For Moon, the work on improvisation and creativity in music video, established in The Takeaway Shows, is taken to the next step and extended in this ambitious project where Moon 'would show up in town and ask around until he met musicians that interested him, and then capture them as quickly as possible' (in Beckett 2010). So, if conventional music video production is 'perceived to be merely promotional clips—new forms of advertising—for songs, albums, films or products' (Grossberg 1993: 186) then the ongoing moving image/sound projects of Vincent Moon take a defiantly anti-commercial stance. To date, The Takeaway Shows (to my understanding) have not involved an exchange of money—which is the true hallmark of amateur production. Saying this, Vincent Moon's success and reach has led to him being signed as a director to Warp Films (2008). However, there is no sign that his more ambitious global projects are being supplanted by commercial work.

Vincent Moon's Takeaway Shows can also be framed in relation to the rise of usergenerated media. In his book *Convergence Culture*, media theorist Henry Jenkins maps media convergence through the spike in 'participatory culture' witnessed as the cultural shift whereby consumers actively 'perform' across the digital media network (2008: 3). In this logic, the work of Vincent Moon has been a catalyst for others to engage with participatory modes of music video production, being repurposed for local music scenes. Moon himself welcomes this influence, saying, 'most of the time it's people who are like, 'It's great and it makes me do something'. He adds, 'there's this strong idea of amateur cinema' (qtd. in Danigelis 2009). His model of a small-scale digital production methodology, connected to a clip-hungry online audience, make the Vincent Moon model an attractive proposition to those with basic resources. Moon says of his own career, 'it was very lo-fi at first because we couldn't afford [to] do it any other way, and now we're keeping it like that because I think it's very important to keep it human' (qtd. in Thompson 2008). Here, his connotation of 'lo-fi' links his work to the lo-fi 'indie' music movement of the 1990s based around use of four track recording equipment.

Another significant feature of The Takeaway Shows is in their status as Creative Commons media. Moon notes on his website that all his music videos are available for sharing and distribution under this framework (2010). That is, there is a broader context for music video production here (that is not purely an exercise in form, aesthetics or process) that joins the Commons media rights framework to facilitate sharing and remixing today (2010). In this context, the Takeaway Shows participate in what David Bollier coins 'The Viral Spiral'. This is where 'thousands of individual authors, musicians, and filmmakers [use] Web tools and Creative Commons licenses to transform markets for creative works' (2009: 263). In conclusion to this article on new directions in music video, the work of Vincent Moon and his 'ascetic aesthetic' marks a rupture in the history, and theorizing, of the form. This developed case study has attempted to provide multiple trajectories from which to consider the form and function of music video as convergent media today. Music video online connects with a matrix of ideas, processes and technologies as a critical part of new digital filmmaking.

This reading of Vincent Moon's contribution to rethinking music video today has focused on a drive to authenticity, the trend to amateur and user-generated media and the advance of the Commons framework. In this context, a new chapter in music video scholarship leaves much to be explored in this domain including analysis of Moon's new Temporary Areas global film project and an assessment of the impact of the ascetic aesthetic for teaching music video today (in screen media curricula at universities). As noted earlier, The Takeaway Shows are the antithesis of the standard 'bibles' of professional music video production and instruction guides, such as *Making Music Videos: Everything You Need to Know from the Best in the Business* (Schwartz 2007). The pedagogical implications will be pursued as part of my New Directions in Music Video research project that has delivered this article. In addition, the spatial dimension of music video online presents another area ripe for detailed analysis from the perspective of a screen media arts framework. For example, Vincent Moon's new Temporary Areas project lends itself to a nuanced study in which the role of music video, film, images and sounds intersects with a geography that is at

once virtual (online) and concrete (within local cultures). The central image for Temporary Areas, on the website, displays an unfolded world map, marked with graphic dots that connect his music videography projects, arranged by country and then city. In my reading, this image calls to mind a kind of digital reinvention of those other Parisians—the 'psychogeographic' street maps of the Situationists—which represents a cultural shift, from a paper cut-and-paste city map in 1965 to the global music video database of Vincent Moon in 2010: networked, interactive and omnipresent.

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