THE MEDIA SWIRL

Politics, Audiovisuality, and Aesthetics

CAROL VERNALLIS

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For Charlie and Beatrice/Bea the bee

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A Note on the Cover

The cover image of Dua Lipa reflects this book's arguments. In what follows I claim that spectacle forms the core of our entertainment economy. And I give special attention to women dancing in formation. Historically, the image of dancing women bears a kinship to what Sigmund Kracauer called the mass ornament (as realized in Busby Berkeley's 1930s musicals). Equally important, this image pops, partly by drawing on saturated reds and yellows, a phenomenon I discuss in chapter 13, on color grading. The media swirl includes so much content that an individual object can only cut through by projecting intensity. The svelte, beautiful women surrounded by others suggests the swirl; a common music video scheme also places a lead singer among undefined background figures. We might seek other images to suggest the swirl.

Introduction

SPECTACLE GETS A BAD RAP. This book makes a case for it. There are good reasons to resist the pull of spectacle. On consecutive Fourths of July, then-President Donald Trump threatened to roll tanks down Pennsylvania Avenue; fortunately the streets couldn't bear the weight, and his parade didn't happen. Spectacle has been understood as a way of maintaining a passive public, often with torture and death as part of the show: Christians thrown to the lions, floggings, the guillotine in the public square. In *Triumph of the Will* (1935), Adolf Hitler's cross-like plane casts a shadow over crowds marching in lockstep. Some of the North Korean public extravaganzas are frightening images of people en masse.

Spectacle often assumes a more benign aspect today, but it still may foreground threatening features. Richard Dyer, one of few scholars who both celebrates and theorizes spectacle, notes that Hollywood musicals at least offered a sense of what utopia can feel like, if not the means to get there.[1] One of my favorite wondrous, elysian film sequences is Busby Berkeley's Depression-era "By a Waterfall," from *Footlight Parade* (1933). For me, the women's private watery spaces—their framed, art-deco-latticed architecture, and partially submerged formations of bodies forming chrysanthemums and DNA—crossfade toward increasing gender fluidity. Though scholars have identified reactionary elements in this number (women matched, as the director said, "like a string of pearls" to be molded into abstract shapes),[2] I embrace the sequence's close with its two pools, and a giant terraced fountain in the back, decorated with women squirting water like sculptures of peeing young boys. Ingénue Ruby Keeler's warbling soprano nestled in orchestral strings works as a siren's call.

What I'm calling "the media swirl" reflects the ways that spectacle saturates everything we experience. We might first think of arena-staged pop concerts and football halftime shows with their skyscraper-like walls of projections, flashpots, and lasers, and drones' bird's-eye sweeps over

the concave architecture, a close-up of the star, who winks, and then immersion again within the crowds, a view obscured by hands and arms wielding cellphones, held high. But Caryl Flynn has also found something similar in brief media, noting that YouTube has realized pop-up, pocket-sized musicals.[3] I'd say that music videos—a genre with a nearly unfathomable reach (three billion views is unremarkable)—now give us pocket-sized spectacles, scaled for one viewer and one performer.

Ariana Grande's video "Breathin" (2018) is a good example. Grande sings while standing in a studio space, steam billowing in from the frame's sides as if to encircle her. In a complementary space, the steam obscures her head alone. She walks through a train station among crowds streaming at different speeds around her, mostly blurred. She sings while sitting on a pile of stacked suitcases under a light, floating motes illuminated by its spot. Then suddenly she's apotheosized, cutting back and forth through the sky on a gigantic swing, surrounded by enormous, gorgeous, cumulus clouds, like some sort of grand Tiepolo-inspired painting. It's a "Wow." How did we get here? We might turn to the soundtrack, with its evocations of a heartbeat, and its unusually rhythmicized phrases that leave space for Grande's breaths. Still, the clip is surprisingly hard to gauge, because in some ways it's so minimal. It's just Ariana with amorphous swirling stuff—just her and us.

And if I squint, I can locate spectacle in even shorter media, like Instagram and TikTok. Beyoncé's Instagram posts of her pregnancy with twins seemed to radiate through the web. A thirteen-second TikTok cellphone video of a wide-eyed cat, multiplied nine times, clapping its paws, and arcing through the top of the screen seemingly crowned by a ceiling fan (and hoisted from behind by its owner) to the Chordettes 1954 pop song "Mr. Sandman," belongs to the realm of maximum cute-adorable-charismatic (though the tune also casts an ominous tone; it had accompanied the closing credits for John Carpenter's 1978 *Halloween*). "Mr. Sandman" was shot by a twelve-year-old girl as her first upload, and it's the best of hundreds of TikTok's "Mr. Sandman Cats." Is this where I want to park my attention?

Yes, I value the merits of my fellow scholars' negative assessments of spectacle, and I know this is a hard-to-resolve dissonance, but I still hold on to many instantiations of it. Guy Debord rightly says that "spectacle is the nightmare of imprisoned modern society which ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep"; with spectacle, "the real world changes into simple images."[4] According to Theodor Adorno, "The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually

promises . . . all [spectacle] actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu."[5] And as Jonathan Crary notes, "No moment, place, or situation now exists in which one cannot shop, consume, or exploit networked resources, there is a relentless incursion of the nontime of 24/7 into every aspect of social or personal life."[6] Virginia Heffernan claims that the irreality of the digital produces a "hyperinflation of not cash, but values . . . increasingly bewildering levels of abstraction distort ordinary experience: a flesh-and-blood friend becomes a wink, an emoji, a $20 bill, a Venmo swipe, no wonder we turn to soil and blood a là Trump." Heffernan claims that "billions of people have passed through the looking glass from reality to the internet."[7]

But I'd add that we might still engage, no matter the distractions or our sense of disorientation. Participation can be time-consuming and numbing. Sometimes I've played a game with my students where we follow YouTube links based on curiosity and Google's algorithms. Sometimes we wind up in good places, but more often than once some place dark, like a less-than-sympathetic clip about a father with Tourette's syndrome. But there are ways to ameliorate or circumvent such experiences, including pressuring Google to more carefully curate its collection. The company, for example, should offer simultaneously encountered, engaging clips that support media literacy and participation—here is one of several strong reasons to participate in the media swirl.

I think Dyer would agree with me that spectacle should be but one component of a life (perhaps apportioned like screen time for young children—I try to make sure my daughter watches no more than forty-five minutes a day). It could use both celebration and deflation (*Vogue*'s seductive YouTube series *73 Questions* calls for serious analysis; I discuss it in a chapter on today's music documentaries). I often feel invigorated after watching spectacle. More able to engage with the world; less alone. Spectacle may be progressive. Stanley Cavell suggests that media move us because a viewer can contemplate what's before her without feeling an immediate pressure to intercede—it's there for her as possibility and reserve—and this can be hopeful.[8] Elias Canetti argued that the objects in spectacles can stand in for people (including sparkly lights and columned rows)—they're a representation of community itself.[9] Perhaps it's that we haven't built the right structures around spectacular entertainment. Perhaps we haven't learned how to read it.

Spectacle has been defined as a phenomenon to be looked at. I'll take this and add "listened to." It can evoke a sense of wonder, but it's human-

built (its seams often peek through). Art theorists often contrast spectacle with nature's sublime—Niagara Falls or a tornado may simultaneously appear beautiful and terrifying. Our responses to spectacle and the sublime have long overlapped. The spectacle's senses of wonder and charm connect to the sublime's sense of being overwhelmed, and its association with nature's capacity to induce fear. But today, with 24/7 work speedup, global capital's acceleration, and new technologies, the borders between these two aesthetic categories are becoming even more porous. An aurora borealis or eclipse can resemble a human-staged light show in today's media-saturated culture, and not always to ill effect. On August 21, 2017, many of us pulled out our protective glasses—bought from Amazon's vendors before they began price-gouging, or freely obtained after waiting in lines at local public libraries—to gaze at the great solar eclipse at midday. Standing in the driveway, peering through clear grey plastic and cardboard, I'd soon find that the almost instantaneously uploaded corresponding YouTube and *New York Times* content would deepen my experience, making the event more tangible for me, and, I felt, for others too. An example where media tilts toward the sublime might be certain audiovisual moments in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). When the monster/God Thanos opines, against the background of multiple galaxies, about obliterating half of them, his words resound as a portent of global warming and our Anthropocene. In December 2019, close to Christmas, Trump released a political ad with his head superimposed on Thanos. Twitter responded with questions about whether his campaign knew what this was all about—another reason to be engaged with this spectacle. I found the clip clumsy but striking.

It has been argued that the political Left is more frightened of spectacle than is the Right.[10] The Left hopes to gain ground through rational appeals, especially arguments derived from Jürgen Habermas, Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, and John Rawls. Frenzied masses of people overcome by Dionysian affects can seem threatening, at risk of falling under fascism's sway. The chaste, even dainty depictions of crowds in Bernie Sanders's and Hillary Clinton's 2006 presidential campaign ads contrast Donald Trump's raucous, unruly ones (e.g., Sanders's "America," Clinton's "Pantsuit Flashmob," and Trump's "C'Mon Ride the Train" and "Argument for America").[11] But the Left might learn how to read and embrace spectacle, especially of images of crowds, because the masses' strong drives are often bound up with desires for change. (Images of utopia and sci-fi may work similarly.)

Spectacle has joyous aspects, then, but also precarious and ominous ones. Film theory's concept of the gaze, that in strong work, part of the image (or soundtrack) stares threateningly back at you, is useful here.[12] Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*, with its anamorphic painted skull nestled at its base that suddenly coalesces into a vision of your death, is one example. What instances of audiovisual spectacle both charm and frighten us? (Perhaps some of Billie Eilish's music videos, or the opening of James Bond's *Spectre*?)

Of course, the media swirl is impossibly big. One could devote a scholarly career either to Instagram or to TikTok. I'd claim nearly everything on the internet seems tinged by spectacle, because the content almost always creates links beyond itself. Spectacle and the media swirl overlap here. The swirl's large and small objects (many web-based), too many to take in, tenuously linked, recombinant and malleable, as a total experience, feel spectacular. When I watch a brief, intimate clip of Taylor Swift at her living-room piano I experience not just Swift, but also her and others' archives (Beyoncé, Dua Lipa, Billie Eilish, and Trump do this for me too—they appear across so many platforms). This book takes on a narrower set of cases, and then, toward the end, it heads elsewhere, to embrace the swirl's syncretism through investigations of industry, science and technology, and politics. While this book is largely devoted to a collection of objects I find worth considering, it probably differs from yours. Unable to cover everything, I don't analyze video games and long streaming series, and I focus on American media in part to better consider US politics. Brief media I consider include many kinds of objects: music videos, commercials, political ads, scenes from movies, trailers, and TikTok posts. But this book also considers longer forms, because in the digital era, when sound and image can be modulated as flexible and interchangeable data, forms and genres intermingle—contracting and expanding in scale: Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016), a string of music videos with interstitial material, becomes a complete work for us; Michael Bay's *Transformers: The Last Knight* (2017) calls for a brief overview, and then we can zoom in on a single autobot's fight.

I've got skin in the game, a chip on my shoulder, an enthusiast's zeal. I'd like us to participate in new forms of interdisciplinarity and to share theorizations of sound and image. We live in an audiovisually intensified culture, and most media scholarship focuses on the moving image. While there's some work on film soundtracks, these don't place the image and soundtrack in relation. We could use a new field of study on audiovisuality.

Brief media, too, have their own aesthetics: they work differently than narrative films, documentaries, and streaming series.

Here's a brief description of the book's structure. Chapters 1 and 2 open with prismatic, layered Hollywood films like Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* (2013) and Michael Bay's *Transformers 4* (2014). Some theorists predicted that the speed and density of postclassical films would hit an upper limit because viewers would become unable to assimilate the content. I've doubted these claims as I've tracked postclassical, audiovisually intensified films, but they may be right. The films considered here, which I think best exemplify the intensified style, are a bit older. *Transformers 4* and *The Great Gatsby* contain sequences that are cousins to music video, as my close analysis reveals.

Chapter 2 considers music video's widening domain. Many forces have made this possible, including the migration from MTV and other satellite services to online delivery, and the more permissive structures for including sex, violence, product placement, and interrupting the song. The aim of clips differ now too—many recent artists are concerned first with ticket sales, merchandising, and licensing songs for commercials than with record sales. With the internet, performers sense that any clip could find an audience. Here, music video dallies with classical Hollywood and high-art aesthetics.

Chapter 3 also questions whether the postclassical film aesthetic maps onto music video. Here, the genre's "late" styles and norms have become established, and we recognize its well-wrought forms. An upper limit of density, self referentiality, and intertextuality has been reached. The clips I analyze are by today's top music video directors—Dave Meyers, Alan Ferguson, Colin Tilley, and Melina Matsoukas. Chapter 4 considers YouTube's aestheticization and shifting boundaries. I look at three phenomena: 1) the constellations formed by YouTube clips of stars (their music videos, late-show performances, *Carpool Karaoke* appearances, and short quasi-documentaries); 2) the success of TikTok as a genre; and 3) romantic costume-drama mashups with pop songs on YouTube, hundreds of clips that constitute a unique genre with surprising aesthetics. These mashups (or "mixes") work on a different register from the book's other content, and from the audiovisual aesthetics scholars have analyzed; they complicate assumptions about audiovisuality.

Part II (with chapters 5–7) pivots to questions of where we go from here. As I note in the first half, I've developed techniques for responding to texts that can't be plumbed by existing methods (one favorite is a mixing, matching, and schematizing approach employing YouTube).

I've also worked closely with others in consortiums. I hope part II's new trajectories, its explorations in industry studies, neuroscience, and politics, will enrich the field.

This book has pushed my abilities to meet and analyze objects in ways I haven't encountered. I now feel better able to interpret novel media. This book's objects include odd sound/image juxtapositions (like the Gatsby party sequence) along with reactionary examples (*Transformers*, Lady Gaga's "Paparazzi," and Fox News). Considering a slice of the swirl makes new connections possible. I was surprised to find that both the grand and the small can feel oppressive. Postclassical blockbusters, like Michael Bay's *Transformers*, are so bombastic there's little way to place oneself in them—they can make our lives feel puny. But the intimate miniatures of TikToks and mashups leave me feeling I've failed to experience lived moments in rich ways.

Francesco Casetti claims that our mediascape has always possessed bad objects, though today much seems subsumed by late capitalism.[13] But we might consider that the field and its eras aren't uniform. When new consumer technologies first appear, openings for resistance can also—such as citizen participation tied to ham radio, Polaroids, Super 8 film, ½- and ¾-inch videotape, prosumer digital video cameras, cellphones, and now, yes, even TikTok.[14] Director Abteen Bagheri recently told me people couldn't tell his iPhone footage from that of a fancy Alexa camera (once both were printed to film). And even the worst objects can inform us about ourselves. This book's instances of music/image relations have shaped my views so profoundly that I believe my thoughts about *real people* have changed (see chapter 12).

Part II, with its first look at industry studies, neuroscience, and politics, might leave readers thinking "why not more?" But there's little in these areas, and a start is worthwhile. The Society of Cinema and Media Studies has a large industry studies interest group, but no journal in the academic databases is devoted to media industries. A search through these databases for color grading brings up nothing; there's also almost nothing on music, color, and moving media, and hardly anything on neuroscience and audiovisual aesthetics. There's little on politics and audiovisual aesthetics. I hope to keep pursuing these areas with the aim of understanding why sound and image moves us.

Toward this introduction's close, I'll turn again to the darker side of the media swirl—the ways late capitalism, technologies, and entertainment interpenetrate—but let me first, mirroring the book proper, build toward there.

As mentioned, *The Media Swirl* aims to help readers become more skilled at reading audiovisual content and committed to the discipline. It also hopes readers will reevaluate their political commitments and actively participate in the commons. Many alternate paths forward are possible and each of us, still making a helpful contribution, may not find ourselves in the same place. Let me follow one trajectory.

The book's first half focuses on honing skills in audiovisual studies. For those unfamiliar, let me provide a brief introduction to or glimpse of the field, drawing on predecessors like Nicholas Cook, Philip Tagg, Claudia Gorbman, and Michel Chion. Cook claims that when music and image are placed in relation, isolated elements within the sound and the image form new meanings through metaphor. Often the blended characteristics share similarities with the original object's elements: in a Citroen commercial, Mozart's music might suggest continuity and drive, while the car itself reflects craft; the two together might suggest not-yet-experienced qualities of technical excellence. But other elements wouldn't be taken up and would recede. Relations between music and image might be based on conformance, congruence, gap-making, or contrast.[15] Tagg's close attention to sound and image is among the most masterful, and his methods for analyzing work through a process of substitution produce strong results. Consider, for example, a brief media object's different musical or visual arrangement—for example, a Pantene shampoo commercial with an oompah performed by a polka band or set in a rural Nordic village.[16] Gorbman notes the ways that the film's soundtrack can disappear from view, and several reasons why we might wish it to do so.[17] Chion draws attention to the many ways sound performs unusual roles in audiovisual contexts. When offscreen, it can adopt a kind of ghostly presence. Sometimes an instantaneous meld comprised of sound plus image forges a sync point, what he's termed a "synchresis." Often sound becomes a property of the image.[18]

Can we take this scholarship on audiovisuality further? Since our culture is so saturated with and influenced by genres and platforms like YouTube, streaming series, Hollywood blockbusters, commercials, and political advertisements, audiovisual literacy is needed, but the discipline faces strong obstacles. Academia could engage even more with popular culture and lend more support for faculty wishing to cross disciplines. A scholar, to analyze audiovisual relations, also needs some chutzpah. That person must be open to addressing music, image (including moving bodies, cinematography, and editing), lyrics, and the relations among them. (This might include looking at a dance gesture against a harmonic shift and an edit, and asking how these might relate to one another.)[19]

I'd like to take a stretch to describe the ways my research contributes to our understanding of audiovisual aesthetics. The work of Claudia Gorbman, Michel Chion, Annabel Cohen, and even to some extent Nicholas Cook's insights apply best for film soundtracks (e.g., sound is absorbed by the image, the film's soundtrack is often unheard, congruence most often claims the viewer's attention, and sound-image relationship pair into complement, contest, and gap making).[20] But these effects tend to be tied to narrative cinema: soundtracks are most often designed, like editing, cinematography, lighting, and camera, to not detract from film's primary aim, which is to immerse the viewer in the story. All parameters tend to render themselves seamless, or, in other words, invisible. But this doesn't hold as true for much of the content we experience today—from TikTok, prosumer-created clips, political advertising, intensified cinematic, postclassical film segments, film trailers, to music videos. Scholars like David Ireland, Robynn Stilwell, Jeff Smith, and others have also made claims about audiovisual aesthetics, diegetic relations, and levels of incongruity that hold better for narrative films than for these forms.[21] *The Media Swirl*, I believe, provides new insights into this content.

Each genre has its own features, but for this introduction, let me stay with the music video, which is a sibling to these brief forms but which also possesses unique features. It's hard to fix a definition for it as it's changed platforms and contexts across four decades (today on YouTube, a postclassical audiovisually intensified film segment, the children's musical limerick "The Llama Song," and "Autotune the News," where newscasters "sing" their stories accompanied by Fruity Loops tracks, might all be called music videos). Still, if we focus on commercial pop clips, we might note that a clip most often comes out of a collaboration among musicians, industry practitioners, and record personnel. The visual track is designed to sell the song. They're often short and must accomplish many things: highlight the star, draw attention to the lyrics, and underscore the music. To teach listeners what's memorable about a song, the image might emphasize the shift from verse to chorus, or showcase an unusual timbre, rhythm, or melodic contour. The visual track might point to one or two musical features at a time, like a guide. For while music envelops us, visual features more often focus our attention momentarily, especially if they're showcasing the song. So, as opposed to immersion, our attention is divided among music, image, and text. Music videos are capable of eliciting a sense of being "alongside." (Music videos may be said to create a viewer-encounter that resembles a dancer's exploration of herself and others, for example, she might attend to her body in motion, while tracking its unfolding in relation to others.)

This engagement differs from narrative cinema's modes of absorption and immersion. Characteristic terms for music video include "brief," "open," "heterogeneous," "elliptical," "poetic," or "strange."

Music videos often draw us in, but they also keep us at a distance. Enticing a viewer, clips present much to attend to—momentary instances across sound, image, and text—for example, "Oh a snippet of the lyrics," or "bass line!" A viewer may trace a path through the video. If she likes the song and/or the imagery, she can find a moment of attunement, of well-judged comportment. A viewer needs to piece out the music, poetic lyrics, performers, settings, camera movement, and editing, and place them in relation. Gaps among lyrics, music, and image can encourage a viewer to circulate within the video and trace her unfolding experience; she can then judge it alongside the video's unfolding.

But then, music videos also proffer distance. Their materials—sounds, lyrics, and images—tend to be fleeting, and, to some extent, empty. Music can be described as resembling a yearning, or, stated differently, a nonlinguistic utterance directed toward something undefined.[22] (Music, it's been claimed, can't point to real objects or express emotions like envy that take targets.[23]) Pop music lyrics are also vague; for instance, who's "my baby?" Music video's images could be said to provide targets for these unnamed desires or drives, but they also step away from them, and the best ones often show us that the task of representing the song is impossible. The Chainsmokers' "Mean What You Say" contains ambiguous lyrics: in a bath of overdubbed synths, "break me off like a cigarette, it's not you, it's me" might suggest the band's relations to its fans, its name, or an introspective moment. Models eat jewelry from platters with chopsticks, and a band member directs a hairdryer at an ice cream cone held by a model's outstretched arm. This last shot recurs, multiplied as a mise-en-abyme of stripes and bathtubs. Another model walks up to the camera, stands still, and then drops several lemons from her clear plastic purse.

But this indeterminacy also offers the viewer several entry points. Clips frequently seem to be on the cusp of getting things started. They show people in a context, and how they might begin to feel and respond. The imagery can help us find a way into a song, and conversely the song can help us connect with the imagery. A listener might embrace Sam Smith's and Demi Lovato's celebratory LGBTQIA+ song, "I'm Ready" (2020), with Smith's airy falsetto alongside Lovato's full-throated belting, and its Broadway-like choruses. From there the imagery can further interpolate a viewer into a less-familiar context—male sprinters wearing flouncy hats and mustaches, and male divers in high heels, women's one-piece bath-

ing suits, and lipstick. Psychologists and neuroscientists have noted that musical performance can create a rapport between performers and groups of listeners. Like pop records, musical performance often aims to build a rapport between performers and groups of listeners—as do pop records: "Music, bodily movement, or any recurrent rhythmic pattern can be something we entrain to."[24]

Several devices can interpolate the viewer:

1. the music: As Suzanne Langer has stated, a song allows us to track the movement of sentiment. A tune isn't feeling per se, but it bears the shape of feeling. When I'm listening to music, I sense emotions, even when attachments seem vague.[25]
2. the charismatic body: watching music video with a performer in motion, I experience kinesthetic expansions and contractions, as well as imagined reachings forward, which can then be projected onto performers (like viewers' projections of figures into Mather's series of filmed moving dots).[26] Through entrainment, a link forms between the viewer, the performers' bodies, the unfolding spaces, and the music's course.
3. the body within a complex, mutating space: tethered to and sometimes at a distance from the performer's body, the viewer navigates through rapid editing, changing speeds, and shifting scales. Though not locked in, she might stay close, so as not to skip an edit, and jump into empty space. If a musical or visual trope comes upon a viewer quickly and the performing body is jerked, the viewer too feels pulled. If the performer's body slows down, one tries to meet it.
4. the camera's assertiveness: music video's cinematic address has become increasingly sophisticated, mirroring narrative cinema's developments.[27] Today, cameras track characters, often through close-ups, partially encircling them, as well as swiftly interpolating them into new contexts.
5. phantasmagoric worlds: with a song number, a film musical's real-time narrative usually bows out. Performers break into dance, and props can become dancing partners, as Jane Feuer points out.[28] In music video, however, both a real world and a heightened, phantasmagoric audiovisual world can exist at once.[29] If a musician draws a sword from a stone, this performer becomes heroic for straddling real-time, lived space as well as heightened audiovisual space.

Not only is the genre's strangeness tied to the effects just described; it also is closely linked to music videos' and pop songs' structure and modes of production.

Music video clips often intimate that music is the ultimate cause of their inner dynamics. This stems from a pop song's production. The pop song is often shaped through nuanced soundscapes and fine details created during recording and postproduction. To set the imagery, directors, musicians, and industry personnel turn to the song as a source to generate ideas. On set, song playback puts performers, costumes, and props in motion, thereby making music the causal agent for visual materials. Perhaps in an effort to sell the song and to encourage repeated listenings and viewings, a network of visual signs also often traces back to the song's authority (to prompt a viewer's care for the song and hopefully buy it). By way of contrast, Hollywood cinema's depictions of causes reside within protagonists who wield a strong sense of agency, and who transcend the obstacles they encounter.

Another odd artifact: the lead performers are often charismatic, but the silent background figures often become uncanny—those stony mannequin-like people, service workers, or robotic figures dancing in formation. Mute or robotic performers, however, often also serve musical purposes. They fill in temporalities and speeds spanning from stillness to rapid motion, which help to illuminate the song's various rhythmic strata (e.g., the star dancing briskly with falling glitter, against the more static backdrop of furniture and background figures).

Music video's imagery also mimics the song's attributes—a clip's figures and settings might form circles or spread out like a brass instrument's bell, for example, and performers turn both toward sonic sources as well as receptively toward viewers. Many videos have an inclusive quality.

Pop songs' emphasis on recurrence also shapes a clip's structure and its ethics. A pop song's sections are segmented and built on recurring verses, choruses, and bridge. Briefer materials like a melodic hook, rhythmic pattern, or timbral quality also repeat in a cyclical fashion. With so much recurrence, music-video imagery tends not to foreground a prototypical narrative. Rather, materials cycle in and out, reappearing with subtly mutated features.

And most music videos lack a prototypical narrative: we can't take the events they depict and arrange them according to their presumed causal relations, chronological order, duration, frequency, and spatial locations.[30] Nonnarrative videos can fail to provide consistency or yield a satisfying resolution because 1) each shot can possess its own truth

value that cannot be undermined by another shot's; and 2) each shot has only a vague temporality. Here, the image follows musical unfoldings; for example, a flute motive and/or timbral hook that comes to the fore and resubmerges. Because of these ambiguities concerning veracity and temporality—and because a pop song's form and lyrics can't undermine one another's authority—the viewer is hard-pressed to decide a video's ultimate meaning.

With so few cues to hold on to, we may search surprising places for meaning. If we're feeling poetic, we might even think all parameters act upon one another as affective agents. I locate some meaning in what I call the "audiovisual seam," or the joining of a song and images (seen best, perhaps, while squinting). That seam resembles what Rudolf Arnheim has claimed about the power of the center within paintings. In paintings one finds the microtheme lodged in the frame's middle, perhaps in the ways hands cradle one another, or hold a flower or glass.[31] In George Michael's music video "Father Figure," the inflexible technologies from the 1980s shape "Father Figure"'s song-image seam (1-inch videotape slipped frames, and telecine-shifted color only as uniform blocks). Yet this roughness fits well with George Michael's brusque, impassioned vocals and the story of a working-class cabby's aspirational love for a high-paid model.

With music videos, I've come to argue that sound and image can resemble human relations. When you've known a long-term couple as a single entity for a while, you may identify the couple with a quality tangibly different from one attributed to either partner. The relationship isn't a metaphor, but rather one more basic—an amalgam—that exudes a kind of scent. As Lars von Trier says, sound and image create "such a beautiful cocktail."[32] The flavors emulsify. And like romantic partners, relationships between sound and image may not only blend, but also become disparate. Fraught, image and sound may tussle, with one dominating. Perhaps the media critic resembles a therapist: What's going on with this dynamic? Is this about fluid or unrequited desire?

Music videos can hold ambiguity in suspension. I'd like to claim that some music videos can also thereby teach us an expanded model of persons—videos can represent people as multiple. As neuroscientist Jay McClelland has claimed, our brain might be structured through neural nets enabling some states to come to the fore and others at another moment, all close to the surface.[33] Scientists note that we perceive but a small portion of the world, and make further guesses about it based on Bayesian inferences. In music videos, elements like characters can come forward and back (a phenomenon E. Ann Kaplan characterized as "Madonna 1"

and "Madonna 2" in Madonna's 1986 "Papa Don't Preach," and that Steve Shaviro describes as "Leibnizian monads").[34] Our engagements with brief audiovisual material can expand our constructs of persons and lead us to ethical positions. Music videos as microcosms may also mirror the obscure dynamics of post-Taylorist, neoliberalism.

I sense that my previous description makes music video appear complicated and opaque, but I believe if many of us devote attention to the genre, it'll become as facile and transparent for us as narrative cinema. *The Media Swirl*'s part I features close analysis, exploring a variety of brief audiovisual material from music videos and film segments to TikTok clips. Here, often, as an analyst, I've felt bereft, wondering whether I was gathering anything. Later chapters, I think, build steam. Pop music is heterogeneous, and scholars can trace different paths through an audiovisual work.[35] Collaborators here have sometimes helped me gather broader perspectives.[36]

Part II takes on new areas not yet well explored—industry studies, ethics and media, neuroscience, and politics. It opens with a discussion of the industry, because in order to traverse the media swirl, its objects might be made more tangible; to do this we need to grasp how these objects are made. Most likely many of us still hold onto some sort of image of the studio system, but the field is now different: small production houses with their stables of directors and freelance production practitioners produce media across many forms, genres, platforms, and media—from commercials, music videos, films, documentaries, to long-form streaming series—under just-in-time labor conditions. The most successful directors and practitioners have strong audiovisual skills.

The ways the production industry has shifted in the last decade has not been well chronicled. When the internet first took off, many traditional production companies didn't know how to adapt, and those skilled at producing music videos and commercials broached the gaps. These houses could offer rapid turnarounds, because they had stables of versatile directors, in-house production services, and external networks of practitioners in reserve. Often the client companies' talent were athletes or pop music stars who preferred these production houses' directors, because they specialized in pop music's new sounds and visual styles. Often the owners of and producers for these houses were also former music video directors (e.g., David Fincher's Anonymous Content and Michel Gondry's Partizan). Production houses like Caviar and Somesuch have global offices, including Los Angeles, New York, and London, which affords 24/7 turnarounds with tight synchronization.

The Media Swirl devotes time to the makers themselves and their relation to digital technologies, audiovisuality, and production practices today. Over several years I've interviewed many directors who've worked across music videos, commercials, and film, including Jonas Äkerlund, Abteen Bagheri, Colin Tilley, Alan Ferguson, David Fincher, Joseph Kahn, Kevin Kerslake, Marc Klasfeld, Francis Lawrence, Melina Matsoukas, Dave Meyers, Emil Nava, Marcus Nispel, Mark Pellington, and Floria Sigismondi. My sense is that their experiences have helped forge a new style for today's moving media. Other directors I discuss in this collection, like Michael Bay and Baz Luhrmann, are good exemplars of this style. Still others, like David Lynch, Wes Anderson, and Lars von Trier, are analyzed in my coedited volume *Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry, and New Audiovisual Aesthetics*.[37] All bring a new sensibility to media-making that's driven by the soundtrack and music video–like aesthetics.

Critics have long pointed to a music video style that has infiltrated filmmaking, but I'm identifying a richer back-and-forth across forms and genres.[38] When making a music video a director learns how to bring the soundtrack to the fore, to place images against the music and lyrics, and to create a sense of flow. Commercials teach a director to be meticulous and concise (e.g., to quickly bring a well-framed close-up front and center). With film (including long-form streaming media), the director practices world-building and ways to suggest a past and a future that stretches beyond the quotidian. Many of these directors also hone their style through branching out into other media forms. Their experiments with virtual reality and gaming encourage them to reconsider viewers' subjective and objective perspectives and sense of embodiment. Participating in social media like Instagram and Twitter facilitates new imaginaries about one's fans and other artists and practitioners, and helps hone one's voice for instant recognition. To cope with the media swirl's frenzied activity and sense of impermanence, many directors also build out to real-world artifacts and contexts: David Lynch has placeware and furniture; Wes Anderson has restaurants; Michael Bay has an amusement-park ride; and Lars von Trier, besides devoting time to cutting diamonds, has a museum exhibit of a house constructed from stacked wax corpses. These gestures may reflect a desire to touch a material shore.

The new transmedial style derives not only from participating in forms and genres; technological and socioeconomic factors matter as well. Digital technologies make sound, image, forms, and genres more malleable and interchangeable.[39] In today's neoliberal, post-Fordist global relations, directors and their collaborators are forced to work ever harder. From my interviews with directors, I've surmised that these artists are a bit more

charming and charismatic than us, but—and this might seem surprising—also more anxious. Some worry they're like the last gladiators in the ring, whose techniques will be ripped off by others; others are concerned that if they don't keep producing, their names will be forgotten. (The capacity to see one's own and competitors' techniques dissected on YouTube is surely an intensifier as well.) Many directors are also affiliated with production houses: working in a consortium, too, influences one's identity and style. The most powerful production houses, with their global offices, seek cheap labor (e.g., commercials are often shot in South America or South Africa with local workers and a few practitioners and actors flown in, the latter predominantly European American). Transmedia directors like Jonas Åkerlund and Joseph Kahn are skilled at dropping swiftly in and out of global contexts, as well as negotiating jet lag. (Kahn shared that for many years he only got five hours of sleep, mostly on planes.)[40]

Director Francis Lawrence's *Dior* commercial "Joy" (2018) with actress Jennifer Lawrence foregrounds this new style. Its sense of movement, editing, and line seems drawn from music video (Lawrence started in music videos to then direct the *Hunger Games* and *Red Sparrow*). The sense of a world around actress Jennifer Lawrence may come out of filmmaking. Chatty three-minute docs surrounding the clip establish a sense of an actress's world, a technique borrowed from social media. Lawrence's entrancing close-ups may stem from intimacy gained from the Lawrences' earlier collaborations, but also again from social media's norms. Similar examples appear not just in commercials, but also in feature films. The jewel-like micro-moments of narrative and spectacle in Marvel's *Infinity War* also come out of the media swirl.

Tracking agents, causes, sources, and influences can be hard. Perhaps we'll discover that ad designers are the true drivers of the new style. (*Dior* has a similar ad for Natalie Portman; perhaps the agency has lit on a template.) Perhaps the real exchange is between music video directors who also work in commercials, and more traditionally oriented film directors who dip in and out.

How, after considering audiovisual aesthetics and the industry, do we move to politics, technology, and science? The next step is to pause and take time to look at morals and values. Why might some of us want to participate in today's commons? Whose values resonate or contrast with ours? What can skills with audiovisual interpretation offer? It may be because of global warming, Trumpism, accelerated technological change, discrimination, and extreme income inequality, but I, and perhaps you too, want to make a contribution. Spectacle creates the hope that people

can coordinate around a common goal. Knowing more about one's commitments in relation to others can facilitate future alliances. Colleagues and I have debated whether art can serve moral instruction.[41] My intuition is that the sum of interactions with media objects, even though they often reinscribe ideology, also illuminates the contingencies of others' lives, and this can lead us to a greater investment in others (though algorithms for YouTube and TikTok can also now herd us into affective and political cul-de-sacs). These claims are hard to measure. But on this, however, my interlocutors and I agree. Stating claims and rationales can be beneficial. *The Media Swirl* seeks to place claims and rational arguments in relation to the aesthetics of embodied, affective media. This should be a persuasive mode, for such an approach enlists somatic, affective, and cognitive networks of the brain and body. I adopt this tack most directly in chapter 17, on Beyoncé's oeuvre, turning to Kimberle Crenshaw, Marx, and Rawls.

In this book I analyze objects that could be considered progressive and/or reactionary, and I aim to withhold judgment until I've completed an analysis. Even after, I like to remain open to the work. I hope this is a model for treating persons—that we can reach out to those with beliefs and orientations different from our own (see chapters 3, 7, 10, and 18).

It's probably easier to be receptive to a media object than a family member or friend, but this potential for relationships still holds. As an example of how we might remain open to a work's meaning, we might look back historically and consider what several feel is problematic about the 1930s screwball comedies that Cavell analyzes: these films' celebration of the rich. But while Cavell acknowledged this problem, he also noted that the film characters' freedom from financial worries allowed them to explore wider modes of possibility with one another, especially in terms of roles as a couple, and their discoveries (new forms of companionate marriage) might be useful for many.[42] Though I would prefer working-class characters, I then saw something new—the characters' daftness and dream-like contexts could create an opening for imaginative roleplay. Here, for me, entertainment and culture could be placed in relation. When I taught in the Midwest (farm country), my students felt discomfort with these films, but I was surprised to find that ones like Howard Hawks's *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) lent an opportunity to explore citizens' roles.

In the first half of this book, we can begin with a question that's highly contested in America—the roles of contingency and free will, and, as I will show, neuroscience can help us here. Through my own introspection, I've adopted a perspective: that health, meaningful work that's valued by others, sympathy from and with the community, respect in one's family,

location, and other such goods, help form a good life. These goods can be contingent and hard to secure. While I desire more—youth, health, excitement, recognition, community—and a restlessness accompanies me, as it does for others under neoliberalism—I also, however, experience gratitude for the ways my life has unfolded lately.[43] Having experienced precarity and contingency, it's hard for me not to grieve that I didn't have more of these goods earlier, to hope that this life's passage will continue, and to wish for and to imagine the possibility of everyone having good lives.

Just as I aim to imagine other lives in media, I think I can picture how other citizens in the United States might have different commitments. I've taught in red states, and worked closely with community members whose worldviews diverge from mine. If I had grown up in a rural area with fewer economic possibilities—say if I owned a hardware store or a beauty salon, and I imagined that most of what I created came from my astute choices and labor (which others failed to deploy), and most of the goods and services arrived from places that felt remote to me—I might experience the world differently. What would it mean to have that context, and to say we are all connected, that we might want everyone to have good lives, and that freedom from economic precarity is a good first step?

I spend time with media and neuroscience here because I think these can help us form a better democracy. Neuroscience shows us that experience is inscribed both on the body and brain. Forms of knowledge are concrete and not easily transferrable (e.g., think of the difference between knowing H_2O as a concept and as water running through fingers). Each person must have her own embodied experiences to know plentitude, precarity, and contingency. Our selves are multiple and come to the surface based on the scripts we've been asked to play. It's hard for me to share with friends and coworkers in red states what different lives might look like. But conversation, as well as making and participating with media, can help establish some common ground.

How can media help us find common ground? Many scholars believe that when we participate in media, we experience traces of others—their voices, gestures, whiffs of thought and mood. As we move through a work, we get a taste of others' experiences and modes of being.[44] Again, Cavell claimed we enjoy film because we can watch the world without feeling a pressure to intervene. This gives us greater freedom to contemplate and more deeply experience events unfolding before us, because we won't be called upon to act. Neuroscientists studying the brain's processing have shown that when we participate in media, we simulate external occurrences through brain modules devoted to theories of mind. These pro-

cesses are even located within specific brain cells, identified as "mirror cells." As Uri Hasson has shown, we sync ourselves to phenomena.[45]

Disclosing something personal about me, I find neuroscience valuable because several family members were psychologists, and we shared the belief that one's unconscious desires to harm oneself and one's relationships. Neuroscience isn't uniform, but I find freeing Jay McClelland's notion that neural nets enable some states to come to the fore and others at another moment, all bubbling below the surface.[46] One's biology and context also shapes who we are. Scientists note that we perceive but a small portion of the world, and make further guesses about it based on Bayesian inferences. They acknowledge the roles of bias and faulty thinking. Cognitive and affective processes are partly sociocultural.

It's been demonstrated that in the stream of cognitive processing, as a viewer traces a path through a media object, ideology steps in. Magnetic resonance imaging studies have shown that both music and moving media encourage a participant's mental constructs, eliciting maps linked to one's own and/or imagined others' experiences. Empathy, once initiated, can be blocked, however, particularly if the participant perceives that the representations belong to an "outsider" group.[47] If a participant watches someone experiencing poverty, for example, and her model is that an individual's choices are self-made and the poor will always be with us, she may not experience care for the other. A viewer who perceives life as contingent, on the other hand, may want to help. The latter's belief system is more in accordance with one I'm affirming—while some self-made Horatio Alger types might be rewarded for their efforts to some extent—this stressful mode of living should not be required. While free will plays a role, gifts and inheritances can play even larger ones. Utopia might be imagined as everyone having good lives.

Here are seven points for envisioning a way forward, but they needn't be yours. Perhaps they may help clarify your commitments.

- The United States is a wealthy country. We have the world's best soil, other rich natural resources, and impressive human capital.
- We're shaped by inheritances and gifts. Inheritances include biological traits, which are unique to each of us; gifts include the contexts in which we flourish or don't.
- Neuroscientists will probably continue to confirm that free will plays some role, but not as much as we currently believe it does.
- We're highly connected and social. No one succeeds or fails apart from the rest of us.

- Though some truths remain uncertain, we can still feel grateful that we're here. A sense of theistic or nontheistic gratitude can lead to a commitment to others.
- Our commitment could be to everyone having good lives.
- The grounds for ensuring this includes freedom from precarity: access to healthcare, education, economic security, respect, and community.

After reflecting on morals and ethics in relation to media, aesthetics, and the state of media practice, how do we get to politics, science, and technology? We just jump. Seriously—we step across. Even our skills at close readings can be useful for looking at content in other disciplines. (And other disciplines can provide new perspectives on our own as well; note chapters 15 and 16.) While there's much to discuss—for example, if we engage with psychometrics, are we validating such practices? What if we admire a media object and know it's objectionable?—we might engage. The costs of not doing so seem too high.

The second half of the book includes forays I hope others will also pursue. I'll provide considerations of psychometrics, facial recognition, and cybersurveillance trailers, as well as close readings of political and news advertising. Alongside this book, my coedited collection *Cybermedia: Explorations in Science, Sound, and Vision* aims to blend media studies with science.[48] *Cybermedia*'s focus comes out of a perspective many humanities scholars share—that media reflects contemporary society's fears, hopes, fantasies, memories, and regrets. These media also suggest how we might orient ourselves in relation to shifting technological and economic forces. Many frames (e.g., from sci-fi and blockbusters) are constructed through a sketchy knowledge of science. Work that links facts with embodied experience, especially experiences of entertainment, can enable a richer understanding of how our worldviews materialize. New connections can become visible. We might then be better able to address the issues we're facing, including climate change, repressive social structures, and responsibilities of the self and community.

Recent neuroscience research provides a backdrop for *The Media Swirl*. Justin Gardner argues that contexts shape our decision-making. Sometimes, we're almost like Bayesian optimists (using a predetermined algorithm that weights previous experiences in relation to a current likelihood); in others we use cruder heuristic reasoning, which can draw on only part of the data, including samples or averages.[49] This makes evolutionary sense. This book's first half includes close readings. Readers may wonder, "Do

I want to know so much about the *Transformers* movies?" Perhaps. For when we quickly and casually encounter a media object, we may know it only through a rough schema. With a slower, more careful reading that attends to multiple sensory sources, and the ways our affective responses shift, we can produce richer descriptions that help us identify a work's progressive and reactionary features, and grasp how it relates to genre, platform, and medium. Several chapters in *The Media Swirl* explore this kind of gap between a rough summary and moment-by-moment experience, such as "Paparazzi," "Tints," and *Transformers*.

Brian Knutson notes that these models should account for emotion, which is variable and contingent.[50] I wish to know whether media literacy can change how we understand media objects, especially strongly politically partisan ones. While neuroscientists can't yet provide these rich mathematical equations, they should be able to do so soon."

Let me turn briefly again to media's dark side, a discussion of how capitalism, politics, and entertainment connect. I also want to consider where media and society might go from here.

My fellow scholar Steve Shaviro and I have been trying to track audiovisual aesthetics and media for a while.[51] Shaviro finds some of the best limit cases, like obscure music videos (with view-counts in the thousands rather than millions) that employ recent pre- and postproduction technologies and that function as riddles, or present something cognitively difficult. Considering his clips gives a picture of what the media landscape will look like and how we can respond. His analysis of Tkay Maidza's "Where Is My Mind? (Pixies Cover)" discusses the way this clip pulls viewers in too many directions to biologically assimilate. Media objects often reflect our moment.[52] Examples like "Where Is My Mind?" connect to the lived sense that there are too many concurrent yet unchartable processes shaping our lives, over which we have little control. We can neither adequately track these threads nor place them in relation to one another. Unproductive but relatable responses might include anxiety, depersonalization, and passivity.

Our moment's unfolding processes feel overwhelming, as this partial list of examples suggests:

1. Global climate change and the planet's degradation, which occur at different rates.
2. The pandemic, with variants multiplying, against a race for an easily disseminated vaccine, with the Global North and South protected unequally.

3 Global finance, run by futures trading and algorithms that move faster than human analysis.
4 Artificial intelligence, with its neural nets and algorithms that reweight their flows.
5 Advances in technological and scientific techniques, including CRISPR, hybrid chimerical creatures, prosthetic brain interfaces, and algorithmically based surveillance.
6 Corporations and the rich seizing power through political influence and dark money to corrode communities.
7 The recurrence of racism, which returns us to an initial moment of theft.
8 Entertainment, disseminated in many ways (large streaming services and smaller single-tiered websites, emerging celebrities, auxiliary mouthpieces), and that elicits staggered scales of attention, and in many forms (from a ten-hour series like *The Underground Railroad* to brief media like TikTok videos and Instagram posts).

Entertainment flows can overlap and influence each other through contagion. Artists, entrepreneurs, scientists, politicians, performers, and musicians cross these landscapes, perturbing them with scandals and long chains of associations. It can feel as if capitalism subsumes all.[53] This is what Lauren Berlant calls living without a ballast.[54] It can leave one feeling powerless, as if one's contribution would make little difference, even though we can watch players as spheres of influence or nodes across all these different scales. Where will we find ourselves? Many experience a sense of precarity. Especially after several years of the COVID-19 pandemic, one can feel isolated and adrift.

The level of interpenetration between politics and audiovisual styles and genres can feel dizzying. Let me share a few manifestations (or symptoms) of the interpenetration of politics and entertainment in 2021.

When I watched the Capitol insurgency of January 6, I was surprised by how many moments felt like art cinema. I couldn't quite believe it. I thought I was dreaming—it was often so audiovisually dramatic (will we ever know how much of it was rehearsed and staged?). Many critics cited Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). I continued in this vein, drawing connections between the crowds from Fritz Lang's *Fury* (1936) and the mad second bananas from F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) and James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931)—they look like the insurgents rifling through papers. The insurrectionists scrambling over and under the seats

in the Senate chamber reminded me of the slanderous scenes of Black legislators in D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), or the vagabonds squatting in a mansion from Luis Buñuel's *Viridiana* (1961). The screening of video documentation (comprised primarily out of cellphone footage) in the House hearings drew from classic film aesthetics, as David Bordwell has pointed out.[55] Montage carried spots of blood across shots toward moments of culmination. The Lincoln Project, too, worked evocatively, posting YouTube clips akin to music videos. Later, Joe Biden's inauguration was derivative of music video. Katy Perry's performance of "Fireworks" before the Lincoln Memorial might take pop fans back to her original music video, directed by Dave Meyers. Demi Lovato's "Brand New Day" showcased the star against a backdrop of circular panoramic screens that drew heavily on aesthetics that had been developed in music videos produced during the pandemic.

But I suspect that no single media object reflects all these interlocking structures, influences, and pressures: shifts distribute unequally across a landscape, as Shane Denson has noted.[56] Nevertheless, I think we'll see more of what Denson describes as discorrelated media: content produced by digital cameras and algorithmic image-processing technologies that is no longer "calibrated to our embodied senses."[57]

Two major forces driving change include computer-based technologies like digital workstations, and new industrial organizations such as the collaboration of major online streaming services with boutique production houses that maintain inhouse stables of directors and practitioners who are facile with audiovisually intensified forms (including commercials, music videos, documentaries, and long dramatic streaming series).[58] But these processes have been in play for some time. So while I can't promise a new frame can be quickly gleaned from this book, I hope it will help readers develop interpretive skills, reconsider political engagements, and become inspired to further the discipline. In sum, music video, YouTube, and audiovisual aesthetics seem to have infiltrated almost everything (consider glitch-based TikToks, though objects less affected by these centrifugal forces include the film *Nomadland* from 2020, with its echoes of Terrence Malick). In general objects and events seem more porous, with materials creating a swirl, or what John Landreville describes as a slurry, with glancing or tenuous relations between nodes that are continually reformed.[59] And see my note on Lil Nas X, the film *Call Me By Your Name*, and Armie Hammer, which discusses moments so volatile and fleeting they might remain out of the body text. The note shows how scholars can be driven to conniptions in response to glance aesthetics.[60]

The Media Swirl attempts to cover a lot—and I'm hoping fellow scholars will continue to explore the following:

1. New methods for analyzing audiovisual content.
2. A review of today's audiovisual theory and ways to deepen and extend it.
3. A discussion of today's entertainment media and the ways they connect to ideology and socioeconomic questions.
4. A picture of today's entertainment industries, accompanied by interviews with practitioners.
5. Close readings of today's transmedia auteurs and their work.
6. Engagement with reactionary and progressive media objects.
7. Music video's history in relation to other forms, including postclassical cinema.
8. Explorations of particular genres (e.g., the costume-genre mashup, TikTok) in all their uniqueness.
9. A cross-section of objects in the media swirl, from the most grand and intensified to the smallest and most intimate.
10. An exploration of how today's media genres have interpenetrated one another.
11. A consideration of "high" and "low" media.
12. A foray into new fields, including neuroscience, big data, and collaborative authorship as they inform audiovisual aesthetics.
13. A call for a field of audiovisual studies that stretches beyond the film soundtrack, especially toward brief media.
14. An engagement with progressive politics, and a possible path for getting there from entertainment media.

I've had the good fortune where I teach to cross-disciplines, and take courses in philosophy, neuroscience, computer science, and symbolic systems. Nevertheless, I'm aware of my dilettantism, and I'm sure many stakeholders will be roughed up by it. But *The Media Swirl* argues that today musical spectacles are all around us, and worth our engagement. I think it's worthwhile to try to be in touch with as much of a larger picture as possible, and then participate in what we can accomplish (I wish we could coordinate especially around global warming and issues of socioeconomic justice). It's easy to feel overwhelmed—that's what the swirl is all about. But I also embrace Cornel West's reminder that forces are powerful, and the only way for survival may be forward.[61]

Notes

Introduction

1 Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," 20.
2 Fischer, "City of Women."
3 Flynn, "The Mutating Musical."
4 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*.
5 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.
6 Crary, *24/7*.
7 Heffernan, "How Hyperinflation Destroys Much More Than Just Currencies."
8 Cavell, *The World Viewed*.
9 Canetti, *Crowds and Power*.
10 Leinweber, "Why the Left Should Reject Politics-by-Mob"; McClelland, *The Crowd and the Mob*.
11 Vernallis, "Audiovisuality and the Media Swirl."
12 Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 86, 92.
13 Fairfax, "The Cinema Is a Bad Object."
14 See #BlackLivesMatter videos on TikTok (I took solace in many of the clips, though complaints of censorship have also arisen).
15 Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia*.
16 Tagg and Clarida, *Ten Little Title Tunes*.
17 Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*.
18 Chion, *Audio-Vision*.
19 When focusing on parameters there are many ways to go deeper. Dance and neuroscience is another area to consider more fully. See Iyer, *Dancing Women*, where Usha Iyer provides an insightful and necessary global perspective.
20 See Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*; Chion, *Audio-Vision*; Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia*; Cohen, "Scoring Music for Westworld Then and Now."
21 See Ireland, "Deconstructing Incongruence." I also like Dickenson's *Off Key*; Kassabian, "The End of Diegesis as We Know It?"; Stillwell, "The Fantastical Gap Between Diegetic and Nondiegetic"; Neumeyer,

"Diegetic/Nondiegetic"; Winters, "The Non-diegetic Fallacy"; Rogers, "The Audiovisual Eerie."

22 For many composers, theorists, and philosophers, including Plato, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Richard Wagner, Arthur Schopenhauer, and W. E. B. Du Bois, music expresses something beyond immediate experience—ineffable or infinite—which elicits a listener's yearning.

23 Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, 9.

24 Gill, "Entrainment and Musicality in the Human System Interface."

25 Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 271.

26 See Overy and Molnar-Szakacs, "Being Together in Time"; also Mather, "Biological Motion."

27 Buckland, *Directed by Steven Spielberg*, 193–212.

28 Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 3–5.

29 Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video*, 48–67.

30 Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art*, 482.

31 Arnheim, *The Power of the Center*, 53–55.

32 Von Trier, *Dancer in the Dark* (book), p. vi.

33 Jay McClelland, "Mind and Machines," invited guest lecture at Stanford University, Spring 2019.

34 Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock*, 150; Shaviro, *The Rhythm Image*.

35 I'd like to acknowledge Jim Buhler, Lori Burns, Allan Cameron, Dale Chapman, Claudia Gorbman, Thomas Grey, Amy Herzog, Caryl Flinn, David Ireland, Kay Kalinak, Selmin Kara, Mathias Korsgaard, Charles Kronengold, Jonathan Leal, Anders Aktor Liljevahl, Dani Oore, Lisa Perrott, John Richardson, Holly Rogers, Steve Shaviro, and Eduardo Viñuela, but that's just a start.

36 See Vernallis et al., "Introduction: APES**T"; Vernallis et al., "Anderson .Paak, Kendrick Lamar, and Colin Tilley," 'Get Up in Our Rearview Mirror'"; Vernallis et al., "The Janelle Monáe Dirty Computer Project."

37 Vernallis, Rogers, and Perrott, *Transmedia Directors*.

38 Vernallis, Rogers, and Perrott, *Transmedia Directors*.

39 Elsaesser, "Digital Cinema: Convergence or Contradiction?"

40 Stanford on-campus interview with Joseph Kahn, spring 2018.

41 See Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions*.

42 Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*.

43 Greif, *Against Everything*.

44 Kendall Walton, in-person conversation with philosopher, summer 2019.

45 Hasson, "How We Communicate Information across Brains."

46 McClelland, "Minds and Machines."

47 Kaplan, Gimbel, and Harris, "Neural Correlates."

48 Vernallis, Rogers, Kara, and Leal, *Cybermedia*.

49 Gardner, "Optimality and Heuristics in Perceptual Neuroscience."
50 Knutson, "Inferring Affect from fMRI Data."
51 See Vernallis, *Unruly Media;* Shaviro, *Digital Music Videos*; Shaviro, *The Rhythm Image.*
52 See Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 78–136, 199–209.
53 Baumbach, Young, and You, "Revisiting Postmodernism," 127.
54 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 110.
55 Bordwell, "A Fast-Paced Cinematic Impeachment Trial."
56 Denson, Grisham, and Leyda, "Post-Cinematic Affect."
57 Denson, "Post-Cinema after Extinction."
58 Society for Cinema and Media Studies has a large special interest group devoted to industry studies, but there isn't a journal on the topic in the databases.
59 Landreville, "The Affective Density of the Post-Internet."
60 I'm writing on a Taylor Swift lyric video with Spanish subtitles that's mashed up with the film *Call Me by My Name*. Then a friend informs me that one of the film's actors, Armie Hammer, has been accused of violent abuse. I ponder this news. Showtime's *Couples Therapy* gives me a good reason to withdraw my analysis—in a therapeutic session the wife shares she's angry at her husband for making friends with her physically abusive father. She asks the spouse to end that relationship. I sympathize with her feelings and believe victims should be offered space and support. Though Hammer's case has not yet reached trial, several women have come forward with complaints. If I were them, I wouldn't want him valorized. But I also want to be true to my own background, and perhaps this might align me with the husband who's in therapy: I have my own history that keeps me sentimentally tied to the clip—a crush on a male professor, which thankfully didn't unfold further. Even with the Hammer news, the clip still chimes with a narrative I recognize; Hammer plays someone emotionally stunted and out of reach. I, like Chalamet's character, dodged a bullet. I'm also reluctant to let go of my connection because I'm not, in truth, compensated much for my academic writing, I've already done much work on the piece, and my fondness for such a media object feels unusual. Also in support of caution is the fact that community norms are shifting so quickly that tacts I take now will likely soon seem out of date, and more worrisome news about Hammer keeps coming out. (His Twitter posts seemingly align him with the iconography of right-wing patriarchy.) I recognize that my moral compass doesn't square. I know I'd feel more upset if the issue included racism and I wonder how I'd respond if the young protagonist were a woman.

And then YouTube's algorithm, which is on some bead I can't decipher, sends me some more mashups of *Call Me by Your Name*, beautifully made, and projecting such love and attention by prosumers.

Does this affect my calculation? While I'm brooding, Lil Nas X comes out with the video "Call Me by Your Name." Does it link to the Hammer/Chalamet film, or is it just again glance aesthetics? I find connections between the clip and my favorite Busby Berkeley sequence, "By a Waterfall, " from *Footlight Parade*—a reason to feel connected. Then Lil Nas X gets into a Twitter spat with the director for FKA Twigs's music video "Cellophane," which I analyze, over claims for authorship. Twigs, like Hammer's lovers, has suffered abuse at the hands of her boyfriend Shia LaBeouf. LaBeouf has acted in *Transformers*, which I've written on, and I'm glad to forgo my sense of connection to this actor. But LaBeouf also gave a wonderful performance in Lars von Trier's *Nymphomanic*. Many scholars have avoided von Trier because of his misanthropy, but I've helped publish a colleague's chapter on *The House That Jack Built,* which is a difficult film. There are also troubling intimations that von Trier acted poorly with Bjork. I wonder if my calculus of whom I'm willing to let go of is shaped by how deeply I care about the work, and for how long the participants have been out of circulation or dead. I'm pulled back in. My friend asks me to watch Lil Nas X on *Saturday Night Live* (where a costume malfunction takes me to Janet Jackson and then, with the crotch grabbing, to Michael Jackson). Lil Nas X's provocation feels good to me, though many of my students wouldn't like it. He's doing a lap dance with the devil. He's selling Nike shoes with one drop of blood. Then critic Jon Caramanica's comments seem to trivialize my concerns, noting that the elaborate song, music video, and product placement are all just so Lil Nas can have a good laugh on Twitter. That's the denouement.

What am I going to do with all this? Read more tabloids . . . This shuffling and turning over almost feels like watching the montage scene of Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* where bodies start to fall out of garbage trucks. A new detail emerges, and my thoughts are, "You've got to be kidding." Luca Guadagnino, who directed *Call Me by Your Name*, will now direct *Bones & All*, featuring Chalamet as a lover who's a cannibal (taking us back again to Lil Nas X and Hammer; Hammer tweeted that he was a cannibal, and Nas depicts his sexual appetites as all-encompassing, e.g., lapdancing with the devil, singing "I wanna fuck the ones I envy," and rapping "shoot a child in your mouth while I'm ridin'"). Does all of this reflect something about our era? Are these makers, as members within the same entertainment community, in the shared midst of processing issues? Or is this just a mathematical cluster? A fluke?

61. West, public talk on behalf of presidential candidate Bill Bradley, Waterloo, Iowa, 2000. See also West's *Race Matters*.

Chapter 1: Partying in *The Great Gatsby*

This chapter previously appeared as "Partying in *The Great Gatsby*: Baz Luhrmann's Audiovisual Sublime," in *Indefinite Visions: Cinema and the Attractions of Uncertainty,* eds. Martine Beugnet, Allan Cameron, and Arild Fetveit (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 180–208.

1 Tony Assness, one of the designers for this scene, has described it as arcadian. It contrasts sharply with the second party, which is depicted as dissolute (and as such, features more Black performers and extras). Luhrmann drew often on Fitzgerald's favourite phrase, "vergilis et in arcadia ego." One of this scene's inspirations was Hieronymus Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights." Hawker, "The Subtle Art of Staging Gatsby's Lavish Parties."

2 Lawson, "The Tragic Emptiness of *The Great Gatsby*"; Corliss, "Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby*"; Scott, "Shimmying Off the Literary Mantle." Dana Polan was critical of the film claiming the 3D-cardboarding also flattened the characters and story. As Pam Cook notes, however, Luhrmann, drawing from the theatre, has long employed 3D-set models in preproduction. Polan, "The 'Great American Novel' as Pop-up Book," 397–99; Cook, *Baz Luhrmann*.

3 *The Great Gatsby* came out in 2013, and 2014 was the first year for a careful census of representation on film. The study found that 73 percent of actors were white. See Laura Santhanam, "30,000 Hollywood Film Characters Here's How Many Weren't White" http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/30000-hollywood-film-characters-heres-many-werent-white; *Hollywood Diversity Report 2014*. Representation for Blacks since 2014 has improved, but Latinx actors are still very underrepresented. *Hollywood Diversity Report 2022*, https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/hollywood-diversity-report-2022.

4 In an interview, Luhrmann stated, "The '20s was a time . . . that there was confusion in the national moral dials so to speak. . . . Fitzgerald . . . can see that something is corrupt morally in society and it is going to come crashing down. And I think to a certain extent we have gone through that ourselves recently. Since 9/11 there has been an added slight moral rubberiness in our world . . . it is this that makes the Gatsby story especially relevant today." Ohneswere, "Baz Luhrmann Speaks on Directing 'The Great Gatsby.'"

5 As Alain Lipietz notes, "Fordism was Taylorism plus mechanization." Taylorism signified a separation between the organization of the production process (which was the task of technical offices), and the execution of standardized, prescribed tasks. Fordism implied a long-term contractualization of the wage relationship, with a monitored increase in salaries indexed to prices and general productivity. In the 1980s,

policies of "liberal flexibility" were put in place by the governments of the United Kingdom and the United States, eventually followed by most OECD countries. Workers were encouraged to practice "responsible autonomy," particularly when putting new technologies into operation, and to practice "just-in-time" labor to assist corporations in managing the production cycle. Lipietz, "The Post-Fordist World."

6 Buhler, *Hearing the Movies*; Kerins, *Beyond Dolby (Stereo)*; Ashby, *Popular Music and the New Auteur*.

7 Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," 373.

8 *Spectre*'s opening draws on the kaleidoscopic cornucopia of Día de los Muertos festivals, but the varied parts aren't as subtly coordinated. Bay's warring robots in *Transformers 4* present more than viewers can take in, but their visual density doesn't sweep across the entire frame. Scorsese's *Wolf of Wall Street* showcases multiple unfolding tempi, but these strata feel relatively accessible.

9 Luhrmann's first three films have been called the "Red Curtain Trilogy." All draw on motifs from the theatre: *Strictly Ballroom* emphasizes dance; *Romeo and Juliet*, prose and poetry; *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), singing and music.

10 Christiansen, "Things Gone Wild."

11 Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds,* 16–17.

12 My approach to analyzing music video involves considering visual, lyrical, and sonic parameters in isolation—color, harmony, props, song form, lyrics, a hook, a timbre, and then seeing how each connects with other features (music to lyrics, lyrics to image, image to arrangement, and so on). The next step involves discovering how these processes unfold temporally. With music videos, an experienced viewer can carry herself through the video as if dancing along with the song—soaring above it, anticipating a peak, collaborating in a slowdown. The *Gatsby* party sequence reveals fewer strongly demarcated experiential paths for a viewer. See Vernallis, *Unruly Media*. See also Buhler and Newton, "Outside the Law of Action"; Kronengold, "Audiovisual Objects, Multisensory People, and the Intensified Ordinary in Hong Kong Action"; Rogers, *Sounding the Gallery*.

13 With determinate chaos, stochastic behavior occurring in a deterministic space produces the highest level of dispersion within an available space. See Gorska-Olesinska. "Polish Digital Poetry," 156.

14 Tiered spaces abound in Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!* and *Australia* (2008) as well, each with their own narrative connotations.

15 As in *Moulin Rouge!* our location often remains indeterminate.

16 Much of the ornamentation appears overgrown (broadly striped leaves, tangled brush and butterflies), but its miniaturization gives it a storybook-like quality.

17 Note: in the pool, extras' appearances alternate between shots. Some wear calf-length dresses to accentuate the risks of immersion.

18 Here the feeling of motion is established more through music and lighting than physical distance. The music descends and accelerates, and several patches of white create a sense of passage. The ways materials cross sensory modalities makes Gatsby difficult to describe—light and sound should not feel so spatial, but here they do.

19 Geoff King has described the ways narrative can continue through spectacular scenes, most particularly with action films. King, "Spectacle, Narrative and the Spectacular Hollywood Blockbuster."

20 Two examples of added 2/4 measures include during Klipspringer's introduction and Nick's decision to get roaring drunk.

21 At the pool's center, one member of a small performing group plays a conga, but it looks like it is out of audio range.

22 In the party scene, dialogue is shaped to the soundtrack and vice-versa. After Jordan says to Nick, "Let's go find him, and you can ask him yourself," the opening of Fergie's "A Little Party Never Hurt Nobody," takes up her line's rhythm and contour. See Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video,* chapter 7.

23 John Belton, email correspondence with author, February 6, 2016.

24 See Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video,* 2.

25 When Nick first meets Daisy, an odd moment of running and dancing between Jordan and Daisy ("we'll put you off into boats") unfolds. Perhaps this sets a stage for these courtship displays.

26 Disco has progressive connotations, both through its inclusive group of practitioners and fans (gays, Blacks, urban working-class youth) as well as its placement within an economically less stratified era before neoliberalism took hold.

27 See Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video*, 29.

28 See Sharff, *The Elements of Cinema,* 17, 56, 87.

29 In an interview Luhrmann explained that he wanted to use stripes even before he found a historical correlate, but he aimed to be historically authentic, so he and his team scoured the historical record, and after surveying thousands of drawings and photographs, they found their inflatable zebra toys. Looking down on the mishmash of color, tinsel and noise, it seems stripes lend cohesion. Egan, "Film Production Design."

30 The dancers wear yellow headdresses, perhaps they resemble nervous finches or parrots. They nicely integrate with the scene's flora.

31 Humphrey, *The Art of Making Dances*.

32 I have not seen dancers execute these moves. Partygoers most likely wouldn't attempt them (I don't think they read well except when captured by an overhead camera).

33 Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second,* 7.

34 Or maybe the stars are the balloons. There were over one thousand translucent, silvery balloons and a crew to keep them inflated. Perhaps the balloons stand for the extras of the extras. Hawker, "The Subtle Art."

35 Shaviro, "Post-Cinematic Affect." See Vernallis, *Unruly Media*.

36 Baz Luhrmann's reports of childhood suggest he had a rich, multidisciplinary artistic training. His mother was a ballroom dance teacher and dress shop owner; his father ran a petrol station and a cinema. He studied acting in high school and college, and in 1993, staged his first opera. He has written and produced soundtracks for several artists, directed music videos and commercials, designed shop windows and murals, and assisted in election campaigns. See Vernallis et al., *Transmedia Directors*. See also Pennington, "Wealth and Decadence."

37 See Ahnert, "A Community under Attack."

38 Consider the soundtrack's EDM elements and the ways they appear and disappear before coming to the fore. Steve Shaviro cites Robin James's claims that this style of music directly registers "neoliberal ideology." The prototypical EDM track, according to James, much like a Goldman-Sachs trader, amps up its cutting-edge technology to the point of flirting with overload, "pushing the edge of burnout and exhaustion." But in the end, this transgressive drive beyond all limits is recuperated as a new source of accumulated value; neoliberalism works through "a sort of transformation of Nietzsche's "what doesn't kill me makes me stronger" into a universalizable maxim." The process is particularly effected through EDM-pop's use of soars and drops. Together, they trace a movement of rupture followed by recuperation; the soar/drop structure mimics something like capital accumulation and depletion in the realm of finance. Shaviro, "Cyborg/Goddess" (unpublished); James, *Resilience and Melancholy.*

Chapter 2: Shattered Pleasures

1 Other good studies of Bay include Koepnick, *Michael Bay (Contemporary Film Directors)* and Bruce, *The Cinema of Michael Bay*.

2 Bordwell, "Intensified Continuity Visual Style in Contemporary American Film."

3 Dargis, "Invasion of the Robot Toys, Redux"; Scott, "Let the Mass Destruction Begin."

4 Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 184, 234, 281.

5 Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia."

6 Savage, *American Savage*, 56–58.

7 Klein, "Transformers 4 is a Master Class in Economics."

8 Whissel, *Spectacular Digital Effects*, 14.