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YouTube Music—Haptic or Optic?

Peter McMurray

In her influential 2004 article, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?,” musicologist Carolyn Abbate suggests that music scholarship has fallen prey to a “metaphysical mania” in which music is reduced from a physical experience in time to hermeneutic abstractions of “the work.” She draws heavily on the writing of Vladimir Jankélévitch to argue that music must be understood as “exist[ing] in time” and as being “a material acoustic phenomenon” contingent on physical bodies performing and hearing.¹ Working from her title, I pose a similar set of questions for music, and particularly dance-music videos, as experienced on [YouTube](#), the massive video-sharing website: What is the role of the corporeal in experiencing music on YouTube? How do ocular-centric practices (the “optic”) emerge and interact with more tactile, or haptic, modes of spectatorship with such dance-centric videos? What happens to such videos as they enter the public realm and viewers respond to them? Where do these interactions between artists/producers and respondents take place?

In addressing these questions, I explore the digital lives of two such videos: [Soulja Boy Tell Em’s 2007 “Crank That,”](#) and [Beyoncé Knowles’s 2008 “Single Ladies \(Put a Ring On It\).”](#) Examining these videos as case studies, I consider their existence from pre-production stages to their status as videos proper to the responses they elicited, including those by the artists themselves. These videos offer a lens, a (tangible) medium through which to view a number of salient issues in YouTube music consumption, especially as it implicates the body. They also simultaneously offer fruitful grounds for engaging with broader discussions in film theory, particularly with regard to questions of presence and its (re)production. As a theoretical starting point, I propose a notion of “haptic mimesis.” This concept brings together two terminological

¹ Carolyn Abbate, “Music: Drastic or Gnostic?,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (2004): 505.

mainstays of recent film and media studies as a way to understand and more adequately account for both the highly body-centric nature of these videos and also the mimetic context of the responses created by “viewers” who learn the dances and then re-enact new versions of the dance, recording themselves and posting their performances online. Understanding YouTube as a site of haptic mimesis acknowledges the radical ways in which spectatorship is transforming, collapsing distinctions both between the corporeal existence of a spectator and the phantasmagoria of on-screen images to be viewed, as well as between artist and audience, performer and spectator. These collapses raise significant questions about the site of spectatorship and the kinds of agency entailed in the transmission of such “viral” videos, crucial questions for understanding contemporary developments of media consumption.

1. Introduction: The Digital Lives of Music Videos

The birth of YouTube has further destabilized the rapidly changing landscape of digitalized music production and consumption. While music videos have been common fare in the pop world for decades, the ease of access afforded by YouTube allows—and arguably demands—that bands turn to mixed-media productions as an integral part of their musical output. Although many YouTube videos illustrate new possibilities for the medium, I choose “Crank That” and “Single Ladies” for several main reasons: their sheer popularity, particularly on YouTube (tens of millions of views); the central emphasis on dance in their music videos, and perhaps as a necessary correlate, the de-emphasis on other narratives in those videos; and of particular importance, their “lives” beyond the video itself. While those “lives” alone could constitute an entire article, I’ll attempt to summarize them briefly here. DeAndre Way, better known as Soulja Boy Tell Em, self-released the song “Crank That” via [MySpace](#) in spring 2007.² Even by pop music

² Kevin Driscoll’s master’s thesis offers an outstanding history and analysis of the life of “Crank That,” addressing the very question of how the video emerged and how Soulja Boy used basic social networking sites to circulate his do-it-yourself music and videos widely. The use of an otherwise unremarkable domestic background is one of the key visual and spatial markers of such a do-it-yourself ethic (in striking contrast with that of “Single Ladies,” discussed below). Although recordings can be made with a variety of video devices, the archetypal YouTube shot of a user sitting in a bedroom or other domestic

standards, the song is elegantly simple: the beats make use of preset sounds from FL Studio software (most notably its synthesized Steel Drum “C5” for the song’s hook) and a chorus-heavy songform.³ The central theme of the lyrics (both chorus and verse) is the command “watch me...” followed by a variety of (sometimes invented) verbs: crank, roll, jock, “supersoak,” and “superman.” But the call for spectatorship became a central motif in the song’s mediated life. At the same time as its online release, Soulja Boy posted a video—no longer available on YouTube—of himself and two friends dancing the distinctive “Crank That” dance in an otherwise unremarkable living room space.⁴ The video, described on [his website](#) as “juddering camcorder footage in his basement,”⁵ elicited a number of responses. Shortly thereafter Soulja Boy posted [a second video](#)—an “instructional DVD” (his words, though no such DVD was ever released)—which both explained the dance step and, capitalizing on its already-growing “viral” status, explicitly called on viewers to record themselves dancing.⁶

The story of what happened next, at least according to Soulja Boy, is narrated diegetically in the official music video, which was released later the same year as part of his formal album release, *SouljaBoyTellEm.com*. In the music video, Mr. Collipark, a

space addressing a mounted webcam suggests a ubiquitous (and in many ways middle-class) architecture closely connected to the filmic “apparatus” of these early years of YouTube. The future of this domestic pose is unclear, given the proliferation of mobile recording devices (phones and tablets, as well as increasingly powerful digital “point-and-shoot” cameras), which has already begun to destabilize this iconic imagery. Fittingly, the evolution of the “Crank That” video follows a similar technological trajectory, beginning in a domestic space with a fixed camera (like a webcam) but in later iterations becoming an audiovisual ode to a ubiquity of screens and related devices (see section 3 below, “Beyond the Monitor”). Kevin Driscoll, “Stepping Your Game Up: Technical Innovation among Young People of Color in Hip-Hop” (master’s thesis, MIT, 2009).

³ The website Audiotuts+, specializing in tutorials on digital music-making, estimates that the entire instrumental track (the beat) should take one hour to recreate with FL Studio software. The site gives step-by-step instructions to recreate the beat: <http://audio.tutsplus.com/tutorials/production/how-to-re-create-soulja-boys-crank-that-in-fl-studio/> (originally published in 2008, accessed Mar. 1, 2012).

⁴ The issue of web-based ephemerality is one of the primary barriers to academic work on and with the internet, raising difficulties in citation, documentation, and equal access across place and time, to name a few examples. In this paper, in cases where original videos are not available but other versions can be found on other sites, links are provided with the understanding that many of these are themselves unauthorized reproductions. Soulja Boy Tell ‘Em, *Crank That (Soulja Boy)*, Home video, 2007.

⁵ www.thedeandreway.com/bio/ (accessed Mar. 1, 2012).

⁶ Soulja Boy Tell ‘Em, *How to Crank That--Instructional Video*. (Home video. No longer available online, 2007; duplicate version with different music accessed on YouTube.com, March 21, 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZIGvA-BjETY>.)

record executive (in “real life” as well as in the video), learns of the dance by watching his young children perform it in his office; they are in turn stunned to realize their father has no idea what they are doing. He instant-messages Soulja Boy, who is busily watching other online video responses to his dance, and sets up a record deal. Meanwhile, the dance—and its viewing, via cellphones, Blackberries, and laptops (more below on screens and their importance)—becomes the centerpiece of the video, both in a large-group performance in a gym and against a plain black background. One particularly telling shot shows Soulja Boy watching dance-video responses posted online, exuberantly responding to his computer screen by dancing himself (2:20-2:28), undermining any platonic theories of spectatorship that posit an immobile viewer, rendered passive by the flicker of images in front of him (and occasionally her). Unlike this imprisoned gaze, a core aspect of spectatorship for Soulja Boy comes in the form of a response through movement and dance.

As the official video’s narrative suggests, the original dance and video elicited a massive number of responses, ranging from positive emulation by [teens in their living rooms](#), [football teams](#), and the legendary [Filipino dancing inmates](#), to harsh criticism from established [hip hop “heads.”](#)⁷ In one of the most curious developments, an entire genre of cartoon remixes also emerged, featuring [Winnie the Pooh](#), [Spongebob Squarepants](#), and [Dora the Explorer](#), among others, dancing the Superman, all of which can be readily found on YouTube. The unexpected success of the “Superman” phenomenon propelled Soulja Boy into the national hip hop spotlight and has led to several other singles (with videos) since that time. Two of the singles from his 2008 album *iSouljaBoyTellem* build on similar approaches in their video versions, with [“Bird Walk”](#) featuring a prominently repeated, primarily male dance routine (but one which failed to spur on the same kind of YouTube response) and [“Kiss Me Thru the Phone.”](#) in

⁷ The most famous response from the rap establishment came from prominent rapper Ice-T, who released a mixtape alleging that Soulja Boy killed hip hop. Whereas older feuds were conducted via mixtapes and audio recordings, Soulja Boy’s responses all came as YouTube videos. Although Ice-T also used YouTube videos (and audio recordings of his rap were also posted there), the videos have been taken down now. Again, the ephemerality of internet musicking plagues traditional academic practice, though perhaps it only raises awareness of the lacunae that recording and documentary inscription (scores, concert notes, etc.) have always left relative to larger performance repertoires.

which smartphones become the medium-within-the-medium for conveying musical presence and personal intimacy. Soulja Boy makes clear that his aspirations extend beyond a few singles, however, stating that he wants to become more famous still: “I wanna be Barack Obama big. And not just for a dance I made; I want everybody to know *me*. So when I’m dead and gone, people can watch my whole life on the internet.”⁸

While the desire for a lasting legacy is hardly new for entrepreneurial artists, Soulja Boy’s clear embrace of the internet as the medium which will deliver this immortality suggests his deep self-awareness (or perhaps hubris) as an artist, as well as his place in the thick of “the first generation of digital natives.”⁹

Like Soulja Boy’s “Crank That,” Beyoncé Knowles’s video for “Single Ladies” is a music-dance video, more explicitly even than “Crank That.” Unlike Soulja Boy, Beyoncé was an established artist prior to “Single Ladies,” not only as a singer but as a performer whose artistic persona relied heavily on dance in both videos and live concerts since her earliest work with the group Destiny’s Child. Even so, the same kinds of material constraints that made YouTube a logical fit for a self-made artist like Soulja Boy factored into Beyoncé’s video production decisions for her 2008 album *I Am... Sasha Fierce*. Apparently due to a shortage of funds after shooting an elaborate companion music video, [“If I Were A Boy.”](#) Beyoncé decided to make a much sparer video for “Single Ladies.” Two choreographers for the video “sat Beyoncé in front of the computer and showed her YouTube clips of people J-Setting,” a dance form that grew out of Jackson State University’s marching band and dance line, later becoming “a popular dance in Southern black gay clubs.”¹⁰ A dance was choreographed and filmed in a single run.

Both the song itself and the music video (released in 2008) were instant hits. Whether or not audiences identified the dance’s gay genealogy—not only was J-Setting relatively obscure, but the video also drew on a dance collaboration between Bob Fosse

⁸ www.thedeandreway.com/bio/ (accessed Mar. 1, 2012)

⁹ John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

¹⁰ Terrance Dean, “Sasha Fierce Takes J-Setting Mainstream,” *Vibe* 2009, 47.

and Gwen Verdon¹¹—the “Single Ladies” video’s visual identity was striking. It was shot in black and white against an “infinite” white background with just three dancers all in similar dress, heightening focus on the dance itself as a bodily performance. One of the signature moves of the dance, a rhythmic flip of the wrist showing the dancers’ hands, highlights the hook from the chorus: “If you liked it then you should have put a ring on it,” which is further (if somewhat ambiguously) reinforced by the metallic glove Beyoncé wears. This austere dance, with its crisp choreography and lack of other props or narrative supports, offers a striking image of powerful, independent women. The performative responses to the video came so quickly that within a few weeks of the video’s release, Beyoncé herself (like Soulja Boy) was watching them. Asked by an interviewer if she expected such a ubiquitous response (“It’s going bananas online”), she replied “No, of course not! [But] I just love to sit in my house and watch YouTube and watch everybody at their house, their own interpretations, their own little body suits...It’s very exciting to me.”¹² Inspired by viewing other YouTube dances (J-Setting, Verdon) and in turn further inspiring YouTube dance responses, Beyoncé quickly became enmeshed in a rich artistic genealogy extending well beyond her own three-minute video.

Yet the stark, raw potency of the dance, arguably the driving force behind its massive popularity and numerous re-enactments, remains in tension with the lyrics

¹¹ As always, precisely quantifying influence is impossible (and perhaps intellectually unproductive). Numerous bloggers, including [Amelia McDonell-Parry](#) at *The Frisky* and [Michael Musto](#) at *The Village Voice* noted the similarities between Beyoncé and Verdon, alleging a kind of artistic theft. Terrance Dean, on the other hand, also makes note of the ties to Verdon and Fosse in his article on “Single Ladies” but foregrounds J-Setting instead, citing the choreographers. In an interview on BET’s *106 and Park* at the time of the video’s release, Beyoncé explicitly acknowledges Verdon and Fosse but not J-Setting. Intriguingly, her encounter with Verdon appears to have been through yet another layer of mediation: “I saw on YouTube [these three ladies](#), and one of them is Bob Fosse’s wife, who’s this choreographer. And they’re doing [Unk’s song] “Walk it Out,” they put “Walk it Out” [as] the music, it’s from like the ‘60s, and it’s one take and it’s black and white. And I thought, Wow, how amazing would that be now.” Verdon originally performed “Mexican Breakfast” on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1969; the recent remix substitutes Unk’s rap hit for the original’s breezy latin jazz. Whether a violation of artistic integrity or not, this repurposing further deepens the multimedia genealogy of “Single Ladies.” Beyoncé Knowles, interview by Rocsi Diaz and Terrence Jenkins, *106 and Park*, Black Entertainment Television. October 14, 2008.

¹² Beyoncé Knowles, interview by Rocsi Diaz and Terrence Jenkins, *106 and Park*, Black Entertainment Television. October 14, 2008.

themselves, in which the ideal telos of a (heterosexual) relationship is marriage.¹³ The ring at the heart of the song's lyrics functions metonymically on multiple levels, bridging the abstract realm of lyrics with the corporeal world of dance. Textually it stands as a symbol of marital success as a whole (at least from a particularly gendered point of view), and it should have become an extension of the body as well once it was worn—that is, again, once a man took initiative to “put a ring on it,” where “it” is actually “her” or “her body.” But of course the ring is absent. Instead of representing success-through-objectification, its anti-presence is grotesquely emphasized by Beyoncé's glove-prosthesis, which precludes the wearing of any ring while simultaneously exaggerating its own blingness. Much like the ring, the glove serves as a kind of post-human extension that mediates between the body and the competing discourses, desires, and technologies around it. In this case, it makes a striking rejection of a former lover, yet fails to make a clean break with gendered expectations for single ladies. Thus the song's edginess has been domesticated.

Whether this heightened emphasis on bejeweled appendages, and by extension a marriage-centric view of relationships, is more or less politically empowering than the dance itself here—whose meaning, again, is fraught with complexity given its queer origins—warrants further discussion.¹⁴ After all, the narrative voice here is above all strong, having moved on from the slight and attendant breakup. How, then, is female strength in dialogue with the heteronormativity portrayed here? Does such normativity render Beyoncé's appropriation of J-Setting somehow exploitative? Or is it perhaps an affirmation of the heightened complexity of marriage as an institution that has changed

¹³ Beyoncé follows up on this theme explicitly with her 2011 single and video, [“Best Thing I Never Had.”](#) Here both lyrics and video recount breaking up with one romantic partner, feeling a sense of (vaguely vengeful) liberation, and then marrying another man, with the entirety of the video depicting the wedding day. It arguably functions as a continuation of the “Single Ladies” narrative.

¹⁴ A related issue, though not necessarily relevant to a reading of these videos, is Beyoncé's alleged status as a gay icon. In [an interview](#) with Chris Azzopardi, she affirms her bond with her gay fans, but as some commenters at the end of the article suggest, much of what she says in the interview subtly reinforces stereotypes (e.g., gays as stylists, makeup artists, and drag queens) and makes presumptions about how her use of gay slang (learned from these same stylists and makeup artists) makes her “one” with her gay fans. Beyoncé Knowles, interview by Chris Azzopardi, *Between the Lines News*, issue 1929, September 2011.

dramatically in the wake of movements for women’s rights and marital equality? Or, less generously, is there simply an unintentional ambiguity at play, a disconnect between audio and visual components of a song that was written well before the video was filmed or even conceived? While the video itself may have been something of “an afterthought,” other videos Beyoncé made around the same period suggest that she had some deeper interest in exploring issues of gender norms.¹⁵ For example, the elaborately narrated video for the single “If I Were a Boy”—filmed at the same time as “Single Ladies”—envisions an alternate reality where gender roles are reversed, shining a light on some of the hypocritical expectations of women. Not long after “Single Ladies,” she collaborated with singer Lady Gaga on two singles with videos, “Video Phone” (under Beyoncé’s name) and “Telephone” (under Lady Gaga’s). The two are quite different, though both draw on communicative devices to mediate relationships, feature fairly blatant sexual imagery, and make explicit reference to the potential for video recording to function as a kind of voyeuristic monitoring. In the case of [“Video Phone,”](#) a video largely without diegetic narrative, the singers/narrators call for spectators to voyeuristically view and record their bodies while dancing suggestively—often with/for co-dancers with video cameras instead of heads. In the lengthy narrative [“Telephone,”](#) the pair take on roles as a couple separated as Lady Gaga’s character goes to prison, an experience marked by sexual assault at the hands of guards, lesbian romance, and insinuations of bondage/domination. Freed by Beyoncé, the two then embark (or continue?) on a violent crime spree, which ends inconclusively as they drive away in the “Pussy Wagon” from Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill: Volume 1*. Strikingly, this complex narrative has almost nothing to do with the song lyrics, which tell a similar tale to that of “Single Ladies”: a woman (the narrator/protagonist) rejects the phone calls of a former romantic interest whose attempts to rekindle their relationship come too late. Meanwhile she copes with her disappointment by dancing at a club.

¹⁵ James Montgomery, "Beyonce's Vma-Nominated 'Single Ladies' Video Began as an Afterthought," *MTV News*, September 12, 2009.

These videos suggest a tentative willingness on Beyoncé's part to challenge certain gender and sexual norms—for example, her choice to cross-dress in one video (“If I Were a Boy”) and to portray a lesbian in another (“Telephone”). Yet despite these occasional acts of transgressive resistance, she ends up portraying an object of sexual desire in all of these videos to varying degrees, reinforcing a very traditional “gazing” relationship between the spectator (typically male) and the performer being viewed (typically female)—the kind of spectatorship central to “Video Phone.” This performance posture has been a mainstay of Beyoncé's videos for much of her career, as evidenced by dance-centric videos like [“Bootylicious”](#) (2001, as a member of Destiny's Child) or “Naughty Girl” (2004, from her solo debut album). In other words, while Beyoncé makes gestures toward gender and sexual equality, these gestures are undermined by more pervasive representational issues that have long been part of her representational repertoire and apparently continue to be. Her ambivalence in directly pushing back against normative boundaries in her music-video oeuvre, especially in these examples from the late 2000s, suggests that the appropriation of J-Setting in “Single Ladies” is less about political action and more about audiovisual artifice. In other words, she and her producers just wanted to make an enjoyable music video.

Furthermore, the high production values of these other videos as well as the relatively organic connections between the song lyrics and videos, especially in those videos released by Beyoncé herself (“If I Were a Boy” and “Video Phone”), suggest a lack of artistic intentionality that further weakens the gay-friendly political resistance one might ascribe to “Single Ladies.” The video, as described above, is a self-acknowledged afterthought (or perhaps an under-thought), at least in terms of the unity of meanings of the dance/video performance relative to the song. And while improvisation and spontaneity may certainly convey political resistance, they seem to lead here instead to ambiguity, despite the common thread of the strength of the female protagonists in both the lyrics and dance. Again, whether this ambiguity heightens a sense of appropriation remains open to dispute, but such ambiguity does open up curious possibilities in its digital afterlife. It effectively creates an unstable point of departure for future performances, leaving more room for interpretation of gender, with a

multitude of political positions depicted and implied. In contrast, “Crank That” has no such semantic rupture between the (apparent) meanings of the dance and those of the song lyrics, with the result that the video and song seem entirely dependent on one another throughout their various iterations. This divergence (or lack thereof) between the song-video relationships here may perhaps account for a greater range of interpretations of “Single Ladies” by viewer-performers across a wider span of gender and sexual politics, while “Crank That” remained to a much larger degree the creative commons of male performers.

Despite such differences in audiovisual composition, a number of similarities between these videos stand out that help account for their similar afterlives online. For example, although she lacks Soulja Boy’s explicit request for internet responses, Beyoncé’s lyrics similarly include imperative dance instructions (“So put your hands up!”) even while embedded within her narrative of a relationship’s end. The song artfully twists back and forth between its own self-contained breakup narrative and Beyoncé’s self-conscious address to the audience. Thus when the narration recounts an encounter with the singer’s ex as she dances in a club with “another brother,” the result is a (narrative) dance within a (literal) dance. And in an even more overly self-referential gesture, she too appears in a second iteration of her own dance.¹⁶ But unlike Soulja Boy, who essentially remade a music video embellishing on his original video, Beyoncé’s first response-to-self was in a different medium altogether. She appeared in a *Saturday Night Live* skit about the filming of the video in which she explicitly addressed the question of who should be allowed to dance with her, both in “the video” itself being shot for the skit and, by extension, in the wider world of viewers.¹⁷ Of particular

¹⁶ One could fairly argue that here the notion of a video as a self-contained object and its “afterlife,” a term I’ve used here without defining, becomes too blurred to be useful. Which version of “Crank That” is the “official” one? Are all broadcasted versions of Beyoncé performing “Single Ladies” somehow part of the original? This inherent ambiguity makes it impossible to delineate strict bounds to the original (and thus to define when its afterlife begins). And yet this blurring is precisely what makes these songs and videos such rich case studies, because they further dissolve the stable ontologies of audiovisual production and consumption. In other words, the notion of a musical work is always already a construct in these instances, its process of being made visible and audible at all times.

¹⁷ This skit originally aired on November 15, 2008. However, because of copyright issues, the video was taken down from YouTube.

significance here, Beyoncé explicitly affirms that she imagined the dance to be performed by “strong women,” raising not only those questions of gender and sexual norms posed above, but also of the intentionality of artists in trying to articulate or suggest implicitly who their music is for or about—a luxury ill afforded by the hyper-responsive (and often subversive) world of YouTube reperformance.¹⁸ While clearly a parody of its own success as a video, the *Saturday Night Live* “Single Ladies” included pop star Justin Timberlake, evoking an image typical of music videos and pop songs featuring other artists as both collaborators and possessors of cultural capital. In this case, the second version is both humorous and also a very public statement of the song’s success: if Soulja Boy’s success is affirmed by catching the eye of record executive Mr. Collipark and thus getting a record deal, Beyoncé arguably succeeds to a much greater degree, garnering not simply a record deal, which is hardly an incentive for such an established singer, but rather prime-time (re)viewing and support from another major pop icon.

Finally, like “Crank That,” Beyoncé’s video generated wide response—a response that lies at the core of my interests here. Significantly, much of the response to “Single Ladies” played with, or sometimes against, the feminist lyrics or queer history of the dance, which although never acknowledged in the original video become central to the *Saturday Night Live* (re)performance. In that skit, Timberlake and two other male cast members don the same outfits as Beyoncé’s co-performers in the original, affecting a whole host of gay stereotypes, once again, highlighting the prominence of the wrist-flip in the original dance, as well as verbal inflection and, of course, cross-dressing. Once again, Beyoncé had offered a very heterogeneous “message” about the sexual politics of the song—and responses were likewise mixed. While Beyoncé was sharply criticized for exploiting gay dance culture, she was nevertheless praised by the hip hop community—most outspokenly Kanye West, and eventually MTV—and many award-giving organizations for producing one of the best videos of all time (according to

¹⁸ See Laura Barnett, “Forget Beyoncé’s New Dance – I’m Crazy in Love with These Routines,” *The Guardian*, January 14, 2009.

West), or at least the year (according to MTV).¹⁹ Meanwhile, pop stars [the Jonas Brothers](#), the musical television sitcom *Glee*, a whole slew of dancing babies, and again, [the Filipino prison dance troupe](#), offered video responses too.²⁰ Although a somewhat crude generalization, in almost all of these performances, traditional tropes of masculinity are brought into question, either by excluding male performers altogether or by signaling some resistance to traditional masculinity by cross-dressing or other means.

Unsurprisingly, Soulja Boy's call to "superman that ho" cast a very different image of manliness. Instead of cross-dressers, dancing toddlers, and fake football teams on gay-friendly shows (*Glee*), "Crank That" attracted [professional male athletes](#), [male celebrities](#), and [groups of young men](#), among others. Even so, once the song/dance moves into a public forum, other possibilities emerge, despite the apparent intentions of the original artists. In the case of "Crank That," children's cartoons were re-edited to dance to Soulja Boy, suggesting that on some level, everyone can dance/enjoy "Crank That," and not just self-proclaimed (super)men. And again, conversely, the performances on *Saturday Night Live* or by Joe Jonas might be accused of ultimately using cross-dressing to reinforce rather than subvert stereotypes of "proper" heterosexual gender roles, once again precluding an easy reading of the gender/sexual politics of "Single Ladies." And finally, groups like the dancing prison ensemble suggest that, to some degree, these dances ultimately take on a life of their own beyond these particular gender scripts. They have entered the rarefied air of [Michael Jackson's](#)

¹⁹ See Mike Hale, "The Swift-West Spectacle, Stoked on Screen," *The New York Times*, September 15, 2009.

²⁰ Although it is not the focus of this paper, the role of internet performers as the gatekeepers of "meme" status deserves further scholarly attention, much as the sanction of Mr. Collipark and Justin Timberlake/*Saturday Night Live* publicly validated these original videos by facilitating their reperformance. The dance troupe at the Cebu prison, for instance, could be seen as one major barometer of recognition of dance-music success, albeit in a somewhat tautological manner: whatever dance they choose to perform must have circulated widely enough that they felt it was worth performing, and their own status as recognized meme-stars, beginning with dances for Michael Jackson's "Thriller" and other pop classics, in turn gives credibility to new songs like "Crank That" and "Single Ladies." Whether this is a re-enactment of power structures that have long served as gatekeepers for musicians (e.g., record companies, radio DJs, major concert-tour organizers) or a new development unique to YouTube will be better seen in the future. For more on the Cebu inmates, see Alexander Seno, "Dance Is Part of Rehabilitation at Philippine Prison," *The New York Times*, January 15, 2008.

[“Thriller”](#) as dance routines with such a clear identity and widespread recognition that the act of re-performance needs no disclaimer or explanation.

2. Haptic Mimesis and the Re-Production of Presence

What accounts for the curious momentum that grew online in the wake of these videos? For the most part, film and media theory has yet to address such media phenomena adequately, despite considerable concern with the landmark shift from analog to digital visual media.²¹ However, two major concerns in recent film and media studies offer a point of departure for unpacking the lives of these videos: what impact copying/reproducing an image has on that image itself and its viewers, and what role the body might play in destabilizing classic interpretive frameworks of film. I turn first to the notion of “haptic visuality” in film, as first conceptualized by Alois Riegl as a counterpart to the notion of “optic” for the visual arts more generally, and as applied more recently to film by Giuliana Bruno and Laura Marks. Second, I address David Rodowick’s conception of the digital as being characterized by an almost limitless process of copying, or in other words, a process of (digital) mimesis, following Marks, Michael Taussig, and others.

Audiovisual examples like “Crank That” and “Single Ladies” and their ongoing digital lives demonstrate a striking synthesis of these two filmic aspects. Bringing the two together, I propose the concept “haptic mimesis” as a theoretical descriptor for the

²¹ In some cases, these videos and the highly embodied responses they elicit seem to contradict outright claims from certain segments of film theory. For example, Vivian Sobchack emphatically argues against any possibility for significant physical presence in the digital age. She makes her case for this lack of presence in her article, “The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic Presence,” in which she argues for the general presence of the photographic and cinematic but not for the electronic (virtual/digital). Instead, the electronic is “dangerous [because of] its lack of specific interest and grounded investment in the human body and enworlded action” (104). She continues: “Unlike cinematic representation, electronic representation by its very structure phenomenologically denies the human body its fleshly presence and the world its dimension” (105). On the other hand, scholars like Thomas Elsaesser have begun to rethink this knee-jerk opposition to a presencing digital, as seen in his writings on a media archaeology of contemporary cinema (including the digital), discussed below. While not explicitly addressing YouTube, such scholarship offers insights that surely have bearing on these videos, with their particular forms of corporeality-through-spectatorship. Vivian Sobchack, “The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic Presence,” in *Materialities of Communication*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

unprecedented process of audiovisual performance, viewing, and embodied re-performance that has become so central to the poetics and practices of YouTube music. Much as Abbate has argued that music must be reconsidered in terms of the physical, or drastic, so too must these audiovisual productions be viewed in light of the deeply tactile (the Latin-derived equivalent of haptic) process of playing a video online and creating/documenting a performance in response. As the foregoing discussion suggests, these “user”-created responses—a digitized audiovisual afterlife—quickly become entangled with the meanings and cultural reception of the original performances. This afterlife requires both physical spectators who not only view but touch, (literally) manipulate and physically interact with digital material (the haptic), and who recreate, revise, and re-perform these dance videos repeatedly (the mimetic).²²

The notion of “haptic visuality” moves film theory in a fruitful direction: as Laura Marks and Giuliana Bruno suggest, the haptic aspects of film are an integral part of their visuality, even in less overtly physical filmic contexts than the instances under study here. Both authors address Riegl’s contrast between haptic and optic modes of viewing art, especially painting, in which “haptic visuality is distinguished from optical visuality, which sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space: in other words, how we usually conceive of vision. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into its illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture.”²³ Unlike these more traditional optical ways of viewing, haptic visuality destabilizes spectatorship by reconfiguring the

²² Despite an etymology rooted in the body itself, the digital resists actual touching. Indeed, one might argue that the digital, especially in sound, is never directly experienced. Unlike analog sound, which causes other surfaces to vibrate, the digital must be continually encoded back-and-forth, into and out of the analog world. At best, it is experienced through the artifacts it leaves as this process of encoding takes place—leaving indexical traces of digital mediation. In this sense, the digital is as far from being touched (the haptic) as possible. And yet in the genealogy laid out here, the notion of haptic visuality points (and since Riegl has always pointed) to a material mode of spectatorship as much as to a material medium. In appending the term “mimesis” to the haptic, I am acknowledging that the actual corporeal engagement here may not take place in the course of the artistic thing-in-itself—the initial song or music video—but rather in the entire course of its existence, as performed repeatedly by other viewer/performers. I thank Alfred Guzzetti for his insights into the materiality of the digital (personal correspondence).

²³ Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 162.

perception of space (whether through proximity or focus), the placement and viewing of bodies, and the depiction of architectural space in visual art and especially film. Haptic visuality also attends to the material ecology outside the work of art proper, heightening awareness of architectural space, the materiality of the viewing apparatus, and of particular interest to me here, the corporeality of spectators themselves.²⁴

From their shared starting point of Riegl's usage, Bruno and Marks trace out related-but-divergent genealogies of haptic visuality that lead to a reconsideration of film in light of the haptic. For Bruno, the haptic can be seen as "an outcome of the spatiovisual embodiment of travel culture," the result of cultural practices of moving through space and from place to place, especially those connected with the rise of modernity (e.g., riding trains or *flânerie* through cities).²⁵ It captures "the measure of our tactile apprehension of space, an apprehension that is an effect of our movement in space."²⁶ Furthermore, the haptic inhabits "that interface between the map, the wall, and the screen"; in other words, architectural space in viewing spaces and in films themselves encourage the viewer not simply to view visually, but to infer a corresponding tactility tied to movement between places.²⁷ Her idea of "interface," which I address further below, has a certain obvious resonance with YouTube, connected as it is to computers and other handheld devices with their variety of interfaces from a keyboard-and-mouse to a touchscreen. Granted, as Michel Chion has argued, the music video typically flouts (often quite openly) the cinematic conventions of "linear narrative" and "dramatic time," potentially lessening the relevance of travel and landscape that Bruno finds so prominent in narrative film.²⁸ Yet independent of such narrative practices, her idea of "spatiovisual embodiment" begins to get at the very

²⁴ I draw on that same binary here, which (again) runs in striking parallel with that of Abbate and Jankélévitch's binary of drastic and gnostic music. Despite the potential rigidity of such binary formulations, they offer a helpful corrective to the decades of semiotic and hermeneutic—and thus largely disembodied—theories of spectatorship and listening.

²⁵ Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 191.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 247.

²⁸ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 166.

core of the dance-music video. For example, the infinite white background in “Single Ladies” highlights the sheer physicality of the dance. And these interfaces between image, architecture, and technology—especially those technological interfaces that conjoin the digital and the analog—then play a central role in the process of filming, producing, and uploading response performances. The quintessential YouTube video—a webcam shot with a bedroom backdrop—is certainly not the infinite whiteness of “Single Ladies,” and yet it suggests a strong lived-in quality that again animates spectatorship through these audiovisual recontextualizations.²⁹

Marks pursues similar avenues of thought, tracing a comparable genealogy of the haptic-optic binary from Rieggl to Burch and Lant, but then moves in another direction in considering how ideas of “embodied perception” are tied up in the processes of mimesis. Mimesis, in her reading of Walter Benjamin, is “a form of representation based on a particular, material contact at a particular moment.”³⁰ She describes it as an “indexical, rather than iconic, relationship of similarity,” noting that in mimesis, “one calls up the presence of the other materially.”³¹ This “call[ing] up” of another’s presence—a material, tactile connection to alterity—resonates with Michael Taussig’s description of identity formation through mimesis as “dancing between the very same and the very different...register[ing] both sameness and difference, of being like, and of being Other.”³² In a world of YouTube media consumption and production, such identities are registered through literal dancing, as toddlers and professional athletes alike re-enact these popular dance-music videos, simultaneously rearticulating an original identity (being like) while changing and recontextualizing that original through

²⁹ Although she places it in a different context, Giuliana Bruno uses a similar metaphor for describing what she understands haptic cinema to be. “I have conceived the haptic space of cinema as habitable space... I understand *habitation* (in which *habit* is inscribed) to be a component of a notion of the haptic” (250). From there, she goes on to describe the haptic in cinema as being connected to motion through space (“an architectural itinerary, related to motion and texture rather than flatness,” *ibid.*) but even so, the idea that living in a space, or inhabiting it, initiates some process of embodiment is critical to understanding cinema generally, and its haptic qualities more particularly.

³⁰ Marks, *Skin of the Film*, 138.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 129).

performance (being Other). This ambivalent process thus both reiterates and destabilizes the “original,” reifying it as *the* definitive version while also adding yet another voice to a collective challenge to that version’s supremacy as the canonical standard.

This (re)productive capacity of mimesis invigorates a more generic notion of the haptic, such that the term shifts from signifying a largely passive mode of viewing or perceiving (following Riegl’s original use) or even the artistic processes of an auteur/filmmaker (following Bruno and Marks). Instead, haptic mimesis entails a potentially empowered and highly active form of spectatorship.³³ These are the processes of *re*-presentation that give rise to “viral” YouTube phenomena. Indeed, as webcams and smartphones—two-way devices that enable viewing and recording—spread throughout society, YouTube has become an important, if not the most prominent, site of haptic mimesis. “Viewers” no longer only “view” or “perceive”; they now are able to respond, and not simply with some other video footage, or even just with a recording of themselves talking or a written comment, but with a re-enactment of the dances they’ve just watched—or are watching, for real-time guidance—by artists like Beyoncé and Soulja Boy. Thus the YouTube dance-music video, while not necessarily *sui generis*, embodies—or encourages the embodiment of—haptic qualities found to lesser degrees in other visual media. Accordingly, vision becomes a process that involves not only the eye and the nervous system, but literally the entire body.³⁴ In other words, haptic visuality in the digital age has not fully run its course until it has become mimetic—that is, until the body has re-enacted a new iteration of the thing seen and, importantly, posted it back to the web as a response to a digital stimulus.

³³ Another way to view this relationship between a mimetic view of haptic spectatorship and its intellectual predecessors would be as a fusion, bringing together Riegl’s materially-inflected practices of viewing with the creative agency Bruno and Marks ascribe to filmmakers who intend to evoke the corporeal and tactile. I am suggesting that such agency resides not only with, say, directors of arthouse cinema, but also with YouTube viewers-as-respondents in much the same way.

³⁴ See Martin Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press), 3-23

David Rodowick suggests that one of the defining characteristics of the digital age is its endless generation of copies.³⁵ Whereas analog copies would show degradation with each successive copy, digital media allow for lossless reproductions that, for Rodowick, signal a watershed moment in the history of visual culture. While copies certainly are a prominent feature of contemporary media (consumption)—and a highly contested one at that, as seen in the recurrent legal battles over file sharing websites, [WikiLeaks](#), or intellectual property legislation—Rodowick’s argument borders on technological determinism, where digital matter somehow copies itself independent of human actors. But as the examples here suggest, digital audiovisual technology has not merely unleashed a copy-paste/drag-download culture of exact replication. Instead, YouTube and other media sites encourage a productively inexact but still prodigious reproduction of visual material through mimetic reperformance. Indeed, the call-and-response of participatory media-making directly defies the kind of passive duplication that Rodowick laments.

Furthermore, in the case of these dance-music videos, mimesis does not simply replicate a dance step or recreate images from a dance-music video in the form of sampling or remixing; it demands the actual reproduction of *bodies* dancing those steps and recreating the physical presence captured in the video. This bodily presence might be unremarkable—non-corporeal dancing is hard to imagine, after all—were it not so often elided in more hermeneutical approaches to seeing and hearing that privilege the gnostic and optic over their more sensual alternatives. Hans Gumbrecht, in *The Production of Presence*, writes:

What is “present” to us...is in front of us, in reach of and tangible for our bodies...
If *producere* means literally, “to bring forth,” “to pull forth,” then the phrase “production of presence” would emphasize that the effect of tangibility that comes from the materialities of communication is also an effect in constant movement. In other words, to speak of “production of presence” implies that the

³⁵ David Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 148-149.

(spatial) tangibility effect coming from the communication media is subjected, in space, to movements of greater or lesser proximity, and of greater or lesser intensity.³⁶

In this case, the tangibility effect Gumbrecht describes is not produced just once; rather the “constant movement” of these dance-music videos continues across time and space, delivered digitally and then reproduced physically in front of webcams across the globe, before finally being reinscribed within the confines of YouTube.

Here Gumbrecht’s comments nicely complement Marks’s and Taussig’s emphasis on alterity, once again pointing to questions of identity and difference in these videos. As described above, these videos play with and against certain scripts of gender and sexuality, and to a more ambiguous degree, race.³⁷ So too do many of the responses to them. Again, a productive if somewhat troubling tension can be seen in both cases: on the one hand, they both creatively play against certain gendered expectations, like the “gender parody” suggested by Judith Butler, in which assumptions about gender, and how gender is visually depicted, are rearticulated in performance.³⁸ Soulja Boy rejects an older generation’s hip hop machismo, as suggested by his style of dress and made explicit in his feuding with older rap stars like Ice-T over what constitutes the proper gravitas of a hip hop MC. Similarly, Beyoncé leverages queer culture to resist certain paradigms of male-female relationships. On the other hand, a strong sense of what

³⁶ Hans Gumbrecht, *The Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 17.

³⁷ A more recent instance of performative response on YouTube in which race played a much more prominent role is the Gregory Brothers’ project, [Auto-Tune the News](#), which made a musical setting of [an interview with Antoine Dodson](#) about the break-in and sexual assault on a family member. The “[Bed Intruder Song](#)” (2010) attained similar web success (over 100 million views on YouTube as of March 2012) as the videos described here, as well as becoming a top mp3 download. As the group’s name suggests, the musicians from *Auto-Tune the News* transformed the spoken interview through Auto-Tune pitch correction software. The resulting song became a popular hit, raising questions of whether the group was exploiting Dodson (they ended up sharing revenues from mp3 sales) and regardless, whether the transformation of sexual assault in an urban neighborhood against African Americans was valid fodder for the Gregory Brothers, a white hipster/indie rock group from Brooklyn. See Dave Izkoff, “The Gregory Brothers Auto-Tune the Internet,” *The New York Times*, August 11, 2011.

³⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 137-138.

Laura Mulvey terms “possessiveness” pervades each of these videos and the responses that followed.³⁹ In many ways, the livelihood of these videos is still largely tied to their strong affinities for the hegemonic “gaze,” both in the production of the original video and in the way in which videos are posted for other viewers to view, play back, rewind, and pause as they desire.⁴⁰ Beyoncé’s video, in particular, is derived from a heterosexualized re-enactment of gay dance culture. The subsequent re-enactment of that re-enactment—not infrequently by white men playing against tropes of masculinity—only heightens the sense of possessive gazing and appropriation. Each successive round of gazing, or possessing, leads to further reperformances that are then subjected to further gazing. In other words, the mere presence of presence, the emphatic existence of bodies alone within these videos, does not ensure any particular performative outcome in the responses that follow. It simply ensures that these responses affirm the body’s centrality as both the stakes and the site of contestation.

3. Beyond the Monitor: Two-Way Screens, Tinted Windows, and the Interface

These videos and the responses that follow, rife as they are with haptic-mimetic qualities, are not merely media curiosities or outliers that come and go as quickly as newly released versions of smartphones and tablets. Far from being mere one-hit-wonders of the golden age of YouTube, they suggest entirely new modes of audiovisual spectatorship, as described above, in which distinctions between the multidimensional fleshy realm of the audience and the flat space of the screen, as well as between the media-producer and media-consumer, begin to collapse. This spatio-performative collapse of spectatorial roles, in turn, has serious implications for a number of related questions in film theory, including questions of where spectatorship happens—whether via “screens,” “windows,” or other “interfaces”—as well as what kind of agency is at

³⁹ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 186ff.

⁴⁰ On a related note, viewers’ responses do not only come in the form of videos, but also through comments posted beneath the video. These comments, while identifying the poster’s YouTube username, obviously conceal much of their identity and allow for an astonishing amount of often vitriolic banter about the videos and other commenters.

work (or play) in the transmission of so-called online “memes” or “viral” videos. Thus I turn my attention to these two questions—the site of spectatorship, notions of agency and transmission—and in doing so hope to demonstrate why film theory needs to understand and account for Soulja Boy and Beyoncé, and by extension, why such engagement stands to enrich scholarly discourse.

Of course, a dancing body seen in a YouTube video and one seen across the room are not identical: such is the “alterity” always attendant within mimetic processes.⁴¹ Thus the nexus between these two worlds—in the case of YouTube, literally the website, ensconced between “virtual” hosted media and the physical hardware necessary to play those media—becomes of critical importance in ascertaining the relationship between these competing realities. I suggest three possible formulations of this site: a two-way screen, a tinted window, and once again an interface. These theorizations could be set in relief against a backdrop of the monitor as precisely that: a site of monitoring. As YouTube continues to gather—and make public, to varying degrees—information from “viewers,” the internet-as-monitor (especially as dominated by Google, the owner of YouTube), may be a theoretical model of increasing use (and abuse) to come, though I skip it here except to note that a sharp ambivalence already surrounds the anthropology of the internet and the user-content-driven world of so-called “Web 2.0.”⁴²

Lev Manovich suggests that the “screen”—in particular, what he calls the “dynamic screen”—is the dominant component of modernity and especially the digital age, the central hub for the kinds of activities described here.⁴³ These videos suggest as

⁴¹ See Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*.

⁴² Although difficult to verify, anthropologist Michael Wesch’s 2007 video [“The Machine is Us/ing Us”](#) almost certainly holds the claim to fame of being the first and perhaps only “viral” video to date produced for academic purposes. In this striking YouTube video, “The Machine is Us/ing Us,” he suggests the simultaneous possibilities for user-generated content to generate a kind of digital Panopticon, in which users are “teaching” a machine (the internet generally, though one could argue that he is taking aim at Google, given its primacy in internet searching) to make connections and form ideas about society and about them, as well as to create opportunities to redefine society in positive ways. Michael Wesch, [“The Machine is Us/ing Us,”](#) YouTube video, 2007, accessed March 21, 2012; and [“An anthropological introduction to YouTube,”](#) from a presentation at the Library of Congress, June 23, 2008, accessed on YouTube.com, March 21, 2012.

⁴³ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 2002), 96ff.

much in self-reflexive ways. *Soulja Boy*, for example, depicts a wide range of screens in the form of computers, cellphones, and especially other handheld devices. Beyoncé's *Saturday Night Live* rendition toggled between shots of the entire set and shots—complete with video filters—that looked to be taken from a finished music video. That this portrayal was a conscious move can be seen on several occasions when characters move into and out of these two layers of screens (i.e., entire set, filtered shots). These shifts between layers become even more prominent given that the show is performed for a studio audience for whom the shifts would be even more obvious (since the filtering would only be visible on-screen). And yet these screens are more dynamic than even Manovich allows, functioning in two or more directions, as “viewers” simultaneously watch and respond with webcams and other video devices. Again, *Soulja Boy* makes this explicit on several occasions, as he uses his screen to see new video responses and to field inquiries from the record executive, both of whom had encountered *Soulja Boy*'s video online themselves and used screen-mediated means to respond. And of course, the entire experience is mediated for viewers by the screen they use to watch.

Building on this multidirectional capacity, Anne Friedberg's idea of a “virtual window,” although applied differently in her writing, suggests the possibility that viewing and producing move in both directions.⁴⁴ These windows—originating for Friedberg in the history of perspectival painting—take on contemporary relevance especially when understood as being somewhat tinted (to further the metaphor), as users may choose to obscure the view from the other side of that window by making themselves more or less “visible” through their choice of usernames, links to other personal sites, and the kinds of material posted (e.g., comments vs. videos, videos showing clear faces and locations, etc.). But laying aside the voyeuristic possibilities of such identity tinting, Friedberg's metaphor of a window seems especially relevant given its architectural implications: a window has a frame, is connected to a wall or other

⁴⁴ Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

superstructure, and demarcates an internal space from an external one.⁴⁵ In the case of YouTube, the “frame” of the website is arguably as crucial to the identity of these videos as the visual content itself. Introductory comments by the “user” (the creator/poster), comments by viewers—often ranging from scathing vulgarities to fawning adulation—and a whole slew of statistics and advertisements crowd the video itself. These statistics include easy-to-find numbers like total numbers of views and overall ratings, as well as a drop-down “Statistics and Data” section that reminds viewers that the interface in question, for all its voyeuristic appeal, is also watching and tallying viewers’ video choices, and turning those preferences into a barrage of advertisements—once again, “the monitor.” In other words, these windows are much more than just a transparent boundary between virtual and real worlds. Here, those boundaries are actively transgressed both by responsive viewers, whose responses to online (virtual) media is deeply physical (real), and by those who peruse YouTube’s assembled data, a seemingly virtual aggregation that in fact maps online choices onto real physical geographies and chronologies existing independent of the web. The frame offers a buffer or waystation between a fully mimetic, bodily engagement (and response) and the ur-material by offering viewers a space to respond—that is, to become active participants in generating the meanings of a given video—in a partially engaged, and thus partially obscured, fashion.

Moving in a slightly different direction than screens and windows, Giuliana Bruno characterizes spectatorial spaces as sites of “interface” between maps, walls and the screen, or viewing apparatus, as described above.⁴⁶ The computer, especially when a webcam and other recording capabilities enhance the tactile tools of a mouse and keyboard, becomes a critical space for interactions, from real-time video chat to meticulous video and audio editing. However, this multifaceted interaction between the filmic, the cartographic, and the architectural also de-emphasizes the bodies involved—the *faces* of this interface—even while maintaining a strong focus on the tactile world.

⁴⁵ I thank Giuliana Bruno for her thoughts regarding the “framed” nature of YouTube’s layout (personal correspondence/conversation).

⁴⁶ Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*, 247.

That is, for all its materiality, Bruno's interface lacks any deep commitment to the presence of human bodies. Or conversely, the haptic mimesis of YouTube dance-music videos suggests a needed clarification in Bruno's formulation of haptic interfaces: these interfaces must by their very nature include and account for the users/viewers/respondents involved, just as they include other components (maps, walls, screens) of the material ecology of film and its apparatus.

As with any theoretical model, we may well ask what such theorizations add to our understanding of the videos under discussion. Or to put the question more specifically, why should it matter whether the viewing/performing/recording apparatus is a screen, a window, an interface, or something else entirely when evaluating or responding to Soulja Boy and Beyoncé? From a historical perspective, I would suggest that—at a minimum—YouTube music “watching” must be considered a major part of the cinematic realm of “the digital,” however inadequate such a term may be for such widely ranging practices. In other words, as film theorists attempt to distill what kind of “rupture” the digital presents, the question of canon or corpus of study becomes extremely relevant: quite simply, YouTube-style “cinema” does not figure prominently in the kinds of “high” theoretical works under discussion, despite its tremendous ubiquity. Some of this is obviously an issue of chronology, but the kinds of films studied may lead to vastly different understandings of digital cinema. As Thomas Elsaesser has suggested, many of the defining characteristics of the digital bear considerable resemblance to an earlier cinema of “attractions”; the result is a very different viewing/listening experience. Writing just a year before the creation of YouTube, Elsaesser seemed attuned to what digital spectatorship would come to mean in the ensuing years: “The cinema is part of us, it seems, even when we are not at the movies, which suggests that in this respect, there is no longer an outside to the inside: we are already ‘in’ the cinema with whatever we can say ‘about’ it.”⁴⁷ Already, Elsaesser

⁴⁷ Thomas Elsaesser, “The New Film History as Media Archaeology.” *Cinémas : revue d'études cinématographiques / Cinémas: Journal of Film Studies* 14, no. 2-3: 76.

readily acknowledges the deeply participatory engagement and physical immersion that such attraction-like cinema brings to the discussion of film history and theory.

This question of whether YouTube should “count” as part of serious scholarship on digital cinema is not merely a question of *la théorie pour la théorie*. As Homi Bhabha argues in his essay, “The Commitment to Theory,” the act of writing theory always entails a particular politics—very much embedded in the histories of power entailed in past theorizing—such that a process of “negotiation,” understood as a non-teleological dialectic, between politics and theory is always at play.⁴⁸ The politics of theorizing the site of YouTube as screen/window/interface are not insignificant here; indeed, both Soulja Boy’s and Beyoncé’s videos are shot through with the weight of gendered and sexual histories that are largely disregarded in the kind of “high,” politically detached theorizing that Bhabha critiques. Furthermore, as described above, their videos show a self-awareness of at least some of these histories. If music videos, as well as YouTube-length cinema of other sorts, fail to adhere to the genre conventions of classic Hollywood film, it hardly seems fair grounds to remove them from a discussion of modes of spectatorship in a digital world, a fact emphasized by their hundreds of millions of viewers.

But the issue is not simply a matter of popular taste. Bundled up with these questions of spectatorship, as suggested by Elsaesser, is the question of the presumed viewer, another central concern for film studies dating back at least to the interventions of feminist film theory in the 1970s. If viewers of digital cinema are expected to be well-versed film connoisseurs mourning the passing of analog film, YouTube—and by extension, the kinds of dance-music videos discussed here—will most likely play a minimal role in scholarly discourse. It follows that the amateur webcam dancers whose recorded responses give these dance-music videos such rich, protracted lives will almost certainly then be written out of any theory of spectatorship. If the question of *who* is watching, or intended to be watching, matters to the livelihood of film—a claim that most theorists of the past quarter century would agree on—it would seem short-

⁴⁸ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 25-30.

sighted, if not elitist, to elide these highly productive viewer/respondents from future discourse of film theory.

4. Sound Bodies: Presence Beyond Film Theory

If the foregoing discussion has leaned heavily on film theory, it hardly means that cinema studies offers the only theoretical entry point for such audiovisual material. Another fruitful area for discussion of these videos and their extended lives beyond their recording or playback comes from work being done on presence and the body in related fields, especially related to sound studies and musicology. Given that these music-dance videos were, to some degree, both initially songs, the presence of the original vocalist becomes of central importance, all the more so because re-performed dances are not karaoke—the original singer’s voice is still heard, reducing or eliminating the need for the spectator-performer to sing and dance. The broader question of how YouTube is listened to and how it does (or does not) privilege a sensibility of a drastic, physically present voice, is intimately entangled with the question of how YouTube is viewed more generally. The two practices can hardly be isolated from one another, and as such contributions from musicology and sound studies offer useful insights for further unpacking Soulja Boy and Beyoncé and their YouTube lives.

Mladen Dolar’s *A Voice and Nothing More* offers new ways of thinking about the voice and the presence of the voice that are indebted to but extend far beyond the brief musings of thinkers like Roland Barthes. In discussing the “physics” of the voice, he argues: “The voice, by being so ephemeral, transient, incorporeal, ethereal, presents for that very reason the body as its quintessential, the hidden bodily treasure beyond the visible envelope.... [A] body can also never quite simply be the body, it is a truncated body [without the voice], a body cloven by the impossible rift between an interior and an exterior.”⁴⁹ In this case, Dolar suggests that bodily presence is contingent on the

⁴⁹ Mladen Dolar. *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 71.

voice as a kind of mediation, which perhaps helps explain the particular success of pop music (largely vocal music) re-articulated through dance in videos. It also raises the surprisingly complex question of sound in these re-performances. Dolar's explanation of the voice here points to a very different question of multi-medium performance: how should music be reproduced alongside dance in these videos? The logic of the re-performed dance has been central to my discussion thus far, yet somehow sound must be (or at least almost always is) included in the performance as well. Strikingly, no one (so far as I have seen) posts YouTube responses of karaoke-style performances of "Crank That" or "Single Ladies."⁵⁰ Instead, viewer-performers must decide how best to reproduce audio, with most (especially non-professionals) choosing to play it back from some speakers in the space being filmed, often with singing or lip-syncing included. In these cases, the voice becomes a barometer for mimesis: the dance is the *sine qua non* of the re-performance; the instrumentals, however, are all but inevitably played back from the original. The presence or absence of a vocal re-performance then becomes a key marker of the haptic qualities of the song, as well as the variable layers of mimesis.

And while Dolar perhaps fails to account for a wide variety of bodily practices (like dance) that are less voice-centric, tacitly supporting a kind of post-Lacanian hierarchy of sensation or embodiment, his central point in the foregoing quotation addresses much of the corporeal appeal of YouTube: it allows for musical transmission from one body to another, bridging the artificial exterior-interior divisions so often ascribed to the body and its various modes of performance. On the other end of the spectrum, of course, YouTube offers a kind of anti-presence music video with its multitude of "videos" consisting solely of a monochrome background with the title of a song and its artist, with no visual image. As such cases make clear, not all YouTube music is equally haptic (or perhaps even optic). But as digital listening becomes ever more entwined with viewing, Dolar's concerns for the place of the voice and the body in musical transmission remain critically important.

⁵⁰ A simple search for "karaoke performances," on the other hand, brings up thousands of instances of recordings of vocal-centric re-performances of popular songs, making the absence all the more striking.

Another example of sound-related theorizing is Carolyn Abbate's aforementioned article on musical presence as a kind of "drastic" enactment, which also offers intriguing possibilities when applied to film. Her general argument is very much tied to—or more precisely, critical of—the kind of musical hermeneutics that typify much musicological scholarship, especially through the 1990s. She points out the tensions that arise with such interpretive approaches when music is not seen as a work or an artifact but as a live performance. One of her examples, however, suggests how blurred the lines between "liveness"-as-presence and the possibilities for such presence in recordings can be. She discusses Laurie Anderson's opera *Happiness*, which involved the use of glasses to amplify the voice and also the sounds of the head of the singer, Anderson herself, as a kind of "translation" of the terrifying sounds associated with the September 11 attacks.⁵¹ She then questions how future listeners will interpret such recorded artifacts and whether they will experience anything like what those who actually attended the performance witnessed and felt. I agree that live performance offers deep experiential engagement with sound that cannot be adequately replicated on a recording. However, I take issue with her assumptions of passivity in listeners (and viewers) of the recording. The fixity of a recording and its seeming effacement of the body is certainly an important point; but the idea that a recording represents the finality of a performance, or that a performance must be limited to a single place or time (or performer), seems directly challenged by the haptic mimetics of YouTube dance-music videos. The chains of responses to the original videos suggest a kind of performance that Abbate, with her concert-centric reading (yes, somehow still hermeneutics) of the body-in-music, fails to account for. The possibilities for recontextualizing Anderson's piece as a recording are countless, even if some aspects of the performance are no longer conveyed so clearly.

Abbate's general question of the presence and ontology of a recording resonates similarly with the two case studies here. Are these dance-music videos performances or recordings? Can such open-ended media objects, which continually generate such

⁵¹ Abbate, *Drastic or Gnostic*, 533-534.

visceral responses, be said to lack presence? Could better recording equipment capture something more of these physical presences in responses (e.g., increasing bodily sounds like breathing, or minimizing room noise)? Would physical presence of the kind Abbate describes come at the expense of the democratic ubiquity of YouTube-based media? Granted, Abbate's scope is limited to music, but the kinds of affective responses she describes are certainly tied to, and arguably amplified by, the interplay between various senses: sound, sight, and touch (at least) all interact to create something beyond listening, a process not dissimilar to the kind of haptic mimesis I describe here. In other words, Abbate's much needed contribution to music scholarship gestures toward but falls short of some of the more radical applications that theories of presence might lend to musicological enterprises, especially those with subject matter like these videos that sit beyond the confines of the concert hall.

Finally, in her recent book, *Sounding New Media*, Frances Dyson explores a variety of metaphors and modes of thinking about sound in contemporary society, especially in virtual and computer-generated contexts.⁵² In response to philosophers/theorists/artists like Martin Heidegger, John Cage, and Murray Schafer, she muses on notions of "vibrations" and "silence" as larger metaphors for understanding alterity, a key trope in so many of these writings. More directly relevant still, however, is her discussion of "immersion," which she identifies in particular with the work of Char Davies, especially her work *Osmose*, and with "embodying technolog[ies]" that allow for "surround sound" and other spatializations and diffusions of sonic material.⁵³ Of primary importance in her discussion is the literal and figurative centrality of the listener/viewer/audience-member in such sound art. Indeed, the radical innovations of digital music in many ways lie first and foremost with the control and (literal, physical) centrality granted to the audience, rather than the artist.⁵⁴

⁵² Frances Dyson, *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, chapters 5 and 6.

⁵⁴ Again, this resonates strongly with the kinds of arguments Mulvey makes about spectatorship and cinema but goes far beyond the relatively simplistic notions of control and response found in Mulvey's discussion of the ability to pause, rewind, etc. Instead, audiences are able to completely change the way a piece or performance unfolds, depending on their location, participation, and response.

While reader-response and reception theories have shown that audiences have always been essential to the existence of art of all kinds, Dyson's work points to audiences' crucial roles in generating and reshaping art. In particular, this creative role of audiences stems from the presence of their physical bodies in encountering art, especially sound and music. Many of the most broadly circulating music videos are connected with hip hop and R&B culture, with their deep connection to sampling and to user-friendly tools for beatmaking (e.g., the computer program FruityLoops, now FL Studio, as mentioned above and discussed by Driscoll). While these tools and approaches to music-making are not inherently democratic, they certainly do inscribe the listener inside the circle of potential creators. Like Abbate, Dyson's theorizing of audience participation, if anything, seems too timid in its claims when viewed next to these dance-music videos and their simulacra. But the centrality of the listener rightly points to a form of embodiment-through-hearing, whether the sound-source in question is a live performance, a recording, or something in between. Furthermore, it hardly seems coincidental that these questions are being raised at the same time in visual studies and music/sound studies; whether it constitutes a "sensory turn" or simply a renewed awareness of bodies corresponding to the emergence of ever more digital media, the simultaneity of these questions suggests (no pun intended) a previous absence of presence across the humanities.

5. The Passage of the Image and the Problem of Agency

Having discussed how and where these videos live (and live on), I conclude with a brief meditation on Raymond Bellour's idea of the passage of the image and what it might mean within the contexts of dance-music videos circulating online, especially regarding the agency of spectators. Bellour argues that "the rise of visuality is more fundamentally conceived according to a thought, and certain techniques become *the guarantee of a capacity for analogies*, the problems of which are posed by the techniques

themselves.”⁵⁵ For Bellour, this capacity for analogies varies in quantity and in type, depending on the media. With regard to the computer image, Bellour suggests a “virtual analogy” in which the image only becomes real through the process of eyesight itself, once again reinscribing the body into the processes of viewing and experiencing digital media: reality does not exist, he argues, until it is perceived.

With this perceptual framework in place, he attempts to articulate what the phrase the “passage of the image” might mean, whether in the context of Renaissance paintings or digital cinema. In particular, he offers three linguistically-inflected interpretations of the “passage of the image”: First of all, the ambiguous word “of” includes the sense of *between*. It is between images that passages and contaminations of beings and systems occur more and more often, and such passages are sometimes clear but sometimes hard to define and, above all, to give a name to. But the reason why so many new things are happening among images is that we also pass *in front of* images more and more and they pass just as often in front of us, according to a movement with certain effects that we might try to define. Finally, the word “of” can imply what is missing in the image, in the sense that it would steadily become more inappropriate to turn the image into something that is really appropriate, a truly namable entity. So there are passages from the image to what contains it without being reduced to it, from it to what it is made from—it is not surprising that this is the obscure, indeterminable spot which is suggested rather than stated by the words.⁵⁶

Bellour’s exploration of such passage begins with movement “between” images, either in different spaces or between different media within a single space, and “in front of” other images, which he connects with television and installations in particular. However, his discussion of this final kind of movement, back and forth from the image to the absences of the image, suggests the rich kinds of mimetic relationships in these YouTube videos. Referring to Bazin, Bellour points to the “image go[ing] sideways, so to speak, to what is said about it,” moving not only between or in front of, but also “with

⁵⁵ Bellour, Raymond Bellour, “The Double Helix,” in *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, ed. Timothy Druckery (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1996), 173-208. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

and through them [other images]” and going “from the image *to* what, having been formed along with it, goes beyond it, or at least shifts the idea we have acquired of it enough so that it becomes hard to define.”⁵⁷ These images are not experienced as contained, ontologically stable things-in-themselves, but rather almost as processes, always in flux, gravitating toward other constellations of images, discourse and, I would add, bodies—whether those of spectators, artists, or both. Although Bellour takes his examples from “art” (as opposed to pop/music video) filmmakers like Hill, Godard, and Marker, I contend that the images found in these two videos travel precisely the route(s), or passage(s), Bellour describes, moving fitfully between stable, namable categories of videos-as-objects, and more fluid states characterized by haptic mimesis. After all, no discussion of either video is complete without an acknowledgment of the kinds of images that have “been formed along with [them]” and these transformational responses indeed “shift” our understanding of these videos, making them very hard to define as objects, but tantalizing as audiovisual manifestations of processes.

Bellour’s model of a “double helix” of images, in which the image and its analogy—in this case, the responses that take place on a perpetual “other side” of a screen⁵⁸—are twisted together inextricably, dovetailing with a number of other physiological metaphors relevant to this project. These similarities seem particularly relevant given the close interactions between the body and technology found in new

⁵⁷ Ibid., 194-195.

⁵⁸ The metaphor of a double helix, in which an image and its analog are twisted together, is also defied in some instances related to this discussion. For example, in live concerts, Beyoncé performs “Single Ladies” with clips from YouTube of different dancers played on-screen behind her (Randy Cordova, “‘Single Ladies’: Hit song becomes a phenomenon,” *The Arizona Republic*, Sept. 29, 2009). In a more complex variation, the band Weezer made a video for their song [“Pork and Beans”](#) that featured many of the “celebrities” of YouTube, not merely through sampling clips from their videos, but by filming new scenes with them, including a finale in which these various YouTube video contributors all appear together on the same stage with the band dancing and interacting with one another. This extremely popular video (over 20 million views in roughly 18 months since its release in May 2008) defies the double-helix model in an opposite manner from Beyoncé: for Beyoncé, live performance of “Single Ladies” includes the “fixed” images from other videos; for Weezer, the “fixed” imagery of a music video includes figures who are known for their own fixed roles—the Numa Numa dancer, the Daft Punk hands, the Mentos lab scientists, etc.—but become immediately “live” and present by placing them in new contexts in which they are able to signify clearly that they are real bodies, able to interact with the real bodies of the band, whose “realness” (like Beyoncé’s) can be attested through live performances accessible to a live audience. In both cases, the space “behind” the screen—the *ur*-image—and the analogies it gives rise to are brought into the same space.

media settings. Specifically, I would like to suggest that Bellour's "double helix," with its allusion to DNA, should be considered in discussions of "the viral" and internet "memes," not so much because of its biological metaphors, but because of its concern with the interface between technology and humanness, and especially human agency.

New media scholar Henry Jenkins has written extensively [on notions of agency in internet culture](#). Culture, he argues, is created by people, not by a "virus" or a self-replicating "meme," a term Richard Dawkins coined from the same root as "mimesis."⁵⁹ Dawkins writes:

We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*.... Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.⁶⁰

Jenkins, however, emphatically argues that culture is a product of people, and that it does not simply "propagate" itself. Later, Dawkins even describes the process as "parasitizing the brain."⁶¹ For Jenkins, internet culture is not simply a parasite; viewer agency is critical to YouTube and other social-network driven phenomena in the age of the internet. YouTube viewers/users, he argues, are not unwitting, uncritical participants in a digital form of mass capitalism (i.e., popular music as *Kulturindustrie*, strung along by iconic figures like Beyoncé). Rather, he ascribes a great deal of agency to them, opposing the idea of "self-replication" intrinsic to the "virus."⁶²

⁵⁹ Henry Jenkins, "If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead: Media Viruses and Memes" (Presentation/White Paper presentation, February 11, 2009), accessed online March 21, 2012.

http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p.html

⁶⁰ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 192.

⁶¹ Ibid. It bears mention that Dawkins did not apply the term "meme" to internet culture, though the notion itself proscribes agency in large part, instead relying on an unstated mechanism of self-replication. Jenkins gives an overview of the usage of this term when applied to the internet in the course of his paper.

⁶² At some point in the future, I hope to explore connections in the theories of mass interaction with cinema that were being discussed actively in the 1920s (Munsterberg, Kracauer) and more recent

One reading of Bellour might suggest that the space that maintains distance and distinction between the two strands of his helix—the original image and its perpetual others/reconstructions—is precisely that of the agency of viewers. It is this agency to decide whether to respond to a given video that ultimately determines whether a video will “go viral” or not. And yet as I described above, following Taussig’s lead, no matter how similar a re-performance may be, it will by definition never be the same audiovisual object as the original performance. Like a helix, the audiovisual afterlife of these videos constantly follows the contours of that original, shapes perception of that original, constantly makes reference to that other image, and yet like Taussig suggests, it dances (or twists?) but is never subsumed in that original. So although one may call these fan re-performances “the Single Ladies dance,” or even just “Single Ladies,” no one confuses them with Beyoncé’s performance. Although Jenkins and Bellour use their biological metaphors in somewhat oppositional ways (for Bellour, biology includes the human agency implicit in later iterations; for Jenkins, it denies it), they share a concern with parsing out the relationship of creativity and technology in a world full of cultural replication, reproduction, and reenactment.

Once again, the human body and its presence as a spectator, a dancer, a respondent to the videos in question lies at the heart of this debate. Bellour’s “double helix” model maintains the physio-biological aspect of the meme, but its multidimensionality also suggests that our definitions of any image—but especially images as volatile and mimetic as these dance-music videos—are contingent on our current vantage point and temporality, including what other images have come before and after our “original.” As viewers (and potential respondents), we inhabit particular “spots” (to use Bellour’s term) in time and place, even in the world of YouTube. What Beyoncé’s online presence meant shortly after the release of “Single Ladies,” for example, has been changed with the release of her subsequent video, “Video Phone,” which explicitly asks for the user of the camera to objectify her and transform her—

phenomena. Earlier theories of physiognomy, universal language, and the connection—and differences—between the body and images of the body also seem highly relevant here.

with her express consent—into a sexual object. She sings: “What, you want me naked? If you liking this position, you can tape it”;⁶³ the video follows with the appropriate gyrations and provocative gestures, a far cry from the athletic stylings of “Single Ladies.”⁶⁴ The autonomy of the image, as Bellour concluded, is a tenuous thing, if it ever existed. In the contemporary age of digital technology, such autonomy is more and more fraught with uncertainty; rather, as suggested by Jenkins, images are more and more defined by the responses to them. Users’ responses to these videos, and other future videos by these artists and others, will surely generate a world of sounds and images demanding further responses from scholars, critics, and most importantly YouTube users for some time.

Postscript

At the risk of oversharing, I’ve opted to add a few personal comments here as a postscript. I was amused and flattered to receive the following SMS text message from a friend this past summer: “go & youtube 'psy gangnam style' - you totally called this with that haptic stuff ur writing abt.” He was referring to the Korean pop singer Psy's hit song/dance/video, ["Gangnam Style,"](#) released in July 2012. At the time, I found myself in the no man's land between a final draft submission and actual publication, so I shrugged off the text message, thinking I would simply leave readers to make the connections themselves. But with the chance for a postscript, I thought I might respond briefly to this friend’s comments and “Gangnam Style” more generally.

First of all, Psy's "Gangnam Style" does appear to be built on a very similar foundation to "Crank That" and "Single Ladies": a catchy, if somewhat pared-down beat;

⁶³ Beyoncé Knowles, “Video Phone” feat. Lady Gaga (single), Columbia Records/Sony, 2009.

⁶⁴ Interestingly, Soulja Boy also had a phone-romance song shortly after “Crank That” in his single, “Kiss Me Thru the Phone.” This song oscillates between suggestions of phone sex and a much more sexually conservative refrain in which Soulja Boy, still a teen, repeatedly suggests that the girl in question should be his wife. As mentioned above, Soulja Boy’s relationship to sexual tropes in hip hop is complex, sometimes adapting the types of hyper-masculine, heterosexualized posturing typically attributed to rap; at other times, he seems to be advocating a path for minority youth who prefer fluency in technology to the fabled life on the streets, so typically glorified in hip hop.

a memorable chorus-line ("Hey, sexy lady! Oppa, Gangnam style"), even for listeners unfamiliar with the Korean-language verses; and most importantly, a dance that is complex enough to allure viewers yet simple enough to be replicated widely. As a fusion of dance and music, these various characteristics, however formulaic they may seem, are then packaged into a music video and disseminated online—garnering almost 700 million views on YouTube as of this writing, some four months after its release. The threshold of one billion views appears not only attainable but highly likely.⁶⁵ Anyone willing to read the Wikipedia entry on the song can quickly tease out the digital afterlife of this video, which includes a tweet by T-Pain, followed by danced remediations ranging from [Psy teaching Britney Spears and Ellen Degeneres](#), to political satire [by Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei](#). Our usual suspects have taken part as well: [Saturday Night Live](#), the Filipino inmates, [sports teams](#) and [cheerleaders](#), and so on. (Stop me if you've heard this before.) Allegedly the North Korean government has released [a video response](#) as well (though its connection is visually and sonically abstruse) and even Barack Obama is being asked about the dance.⁶⁶ But what more can Psy contribute to this discussion? Is "Gangnam Style" really just another iteration of the same phenomenon?

Obama seems a useful pivot, as I write this on election night (Nov. 6, 2012) waiting for voting returns to trickle in. Politics aside, this project has taken slightly longer than a presidential term, perhaps not unusual for academic writing but eons in the realm of digital time. How do these videos exist in time? Before addressing this briefly, I'd note that Psy's video-and-dance triumph deserves much fuller analysis on its own terms. In the year of "Linsanity" in American sports and incessant appeals to

⁶⁵ To add a post-Postscript comment, "Gangnam Style" became the most-viewed video on YouTube on November 24, 2012 (passing Justin Bieber's "Baby") and was viewed for the billionth time sometime early on December 21, 2012. According to YouTube's own blogpost about the landmark event, "fan tributes to Gangnam Style are now being viewed 20 million times every single day." "Gangnam Style makes YouTube History," *YouTube Official Blog*, December 21, 2012, <http://youtube-global.blogspot.com/2012/12/ytvev.html>. All footnotes in this Postscript section are dated December 29, 2012.

⁶⁶ See Su Hyun Lee, "Viral Video Gets Propaganda Treatment" *The New York Times*, September 20, 2012, and Maria Puente. "'Gangnam Style' in the White House? Oh no, not there, too!" *USA Today*, November 6, 2012.

Latino voters in the aforementioned presidential politics,⁶⁷ it has become clear (yet again) that the reductive black-white paradigms that frame racial discourse in the U.S. and beyond fail to provide adequate language and understanding to disentangle contemporary culture. Gender, place, issues of "style," globalization of pop music, language and translation, humor, and even consumption more generally: Psy has laid out a veritable feast for scholars of music and cultural studies. I look forward to others' explorations of these (and surely other) topics in "Gangnam Style."

But back to the question of time: what has happened in the past four (or five) years digitally? Or rather, how have these years unfolded and passed in(to) the realm of digital audiovisuality? YouTube itself provides a crude outline of time passing in its Video Statistics drop-down menu, located to the immediate right of the number of views (see screenshots in figures 1-2 below).⁶⁸ The initial jump in views of a hit like "Crank That" or "Single Ladies" stands out immediately. "Gangnam Style," with its shorter lifespan, shows the sigmoid-curve inflections that presumably would have been seen in the precipitous rise of the other videos: a gradual start, then a jump in popularity that eventually slows (i.e., the curve flattens, as in a Gompertz function). These graphs suggest, among other things, that the popularity of "Gangnam Style" as measured by rate of YouTube viewership is beginning to wane and flatten out; the "blur" of the video is decreasing, such that the video is simultaneously coming into sharper focus and also greater obscurity through the digital afterimage of its mimetic

⁶⁷ Regarding Jeremy Lin's rapid ascent into NBA stardom and the issues of race that have accompanied it, see Sean Gregory, "Linsanity!" *Time*, February 27, 2012, and Chris Greenberg, "ESPN Jeremy Lin Headline: Fired Employee Claims No Racism Was Intended," *The Huffington Post*, February 20, 2012. In many regards, Lin is subject to the same kinds of mediations as discussed elsewhere here, as seen in [a skit about him and media discourses of race](#) on *Saturday Night Live*, as well as a more obscure [video of him dancing another "viral dance," the Dougie](#), alongside his teammates during his rookie season. On Latino politics and the American presidential election, see Cindy Y. Rodriguez, "Latino Vote Key to Obama's Re-election," *CNN*, November 9, 2012, and Adam Nagourney, "Latino Growth Not Fully Felt at Voting Booth," *The New York Times*, June 9, 2012

⁶⁸ The screenshots included here, taken November 6, 2012, reflect the layout described here, with Video Statistics to the right of the view counter. Since then, YouTube has slightly redesigned its viewing interface, so the Video Statistics button is found as the same iconic image of bar graphs, but now located below the view counter in a row of other (slightly) interactive commands: "About," "Share," "Add to," Statistics [bar graph icon], Report [flag icon]. In the spirit of digital media archaeology, I include my original text and screenshots.

re-enactments.⁶⁹ If I may insert a purely personal, experiential note, I'd point out that Soulja Boy *feels* culturally quaint at this point—that is, in digital lifespans “Crank That” seems not just five years old, but rather several generations removed from the present. Soulja Boy himself has largely aged into post-adolescent pop oblivion. “Single Ladies” has perhaps aged more gracefully, but it no longer commands the kind of cultural cachet it once had either. Both videos continue to accumulate views, though they seem unlikely to ever catch up to “Gangnam Style” at this point.

So what does this aging say about temporality? To reconnect with Bellour, I'd simply suggest that the passage of the image in digital time happens in different ways than our analog models would predict, or than our pre-digital phenomenologies have habituated us to readily comprehend. This is above all an intuitive claim. I feel an odd ennui from trying to keep up with the glut of digitalia that has emerged in the past year in the form of videos, photos (especially those artificially aged into digital nostalgia), tweets, virtual pinboards, and other text-based “memes.” Perhaps I have aged along with the internet, or maybe the internet has aged me, foisting a certain temporality—cycling repeatedly, ever faster—on my existence, whether I like it or not. (Mostly I like it, ennui aside.)

I'm not the first to comment on this sense of digitally mediated time. Recent publications and essay collections by Timothy Scott Barker, Emily Keightley (featuring Anna Reading's outstanding essay on “global time”), Robert Hassan and Ronald Purser all offer “born digital” models for theorizing time.⁷⁰ Michel Serres, in conversation with Bruno Latour, famously described time as a folded or crumpled handkerchief: “Two

⁶⁹ Enda Duffy, *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 175ff. As an additional post-postscript comment, the viewership of “Gangnam Style” has not only increased, but its view rate has increased slightly as well, reversing the inevitable flattening of its viewership curve. Given the finite number of spectators in the world, the rate will (almost) certainly taper off eventually, but the past two months suggest that Psy's “blur” continues still. One possible explanation for this trajectory could be the spate of year-in-review articles by blogs, newspapers, and other websites (including this one) that link to the YouTube clip to acknowledge its massive popularity this year.

⁷⁰ Timothy Scott Barker, *Time and the Digital: Connecting Technology, Aesthetics, and a Process Philosophy of Time* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2012); Emily Keightley, ed., *Time, Media and Modernity* (New York: Palgrave, 2012); Robert Hassan and Ronald Purser, *24/7: Time and Temporality in the Network Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Business Books, 2007).

distant points suddenly are close, even superimposed.... As we experience time—as much in our inner senses as externally in nature, as much as *le temps* of history as *le temps* of weather—it resembles this crumpled version much more than the flat, overly simplified one.... *People usually confuse time and the measurement of time.*⁷¹ Somehow the emergence of Psy’s hit song/video/dance combo feels like just such a crumpling, bringing YouTube-time in late 2012 into close contact with earlier moments in its own history, when Soulja Boy and Beyoncé had their respective moments of remediated fame. These images have (largely) passed, to use Bellour’s term, yet in “Gangnam Style,” a completely different complex of images, cobbled together digitally by Psy, invokes a recapitulation of these mediated pasts. Time has clearly passed, yet our measurement of that time is necessarily recursive, dependent on our calling to mind events from the past to understand and gauge the present. The medium is no longer a message, but rather the measure of time, passed and passing.

Google has offered crude analytical tools in YouTube to measure the time of these videos—their popularity lifespan, as quantified through “likes” and “dislikes,” number of comments, and viewer demographics (i.e., middle-age women from Chile or college-age men in Brazil). But these statistics miss the point. They attempt to measure these videos; instead these videos could themselves well serve as the measuring stick of digital time passing. A cultural phenomenon remains in the spotlight as long as “Single Ladies”; or grows as rapidly as “Gangnam Style”; or vanishes from our digital memories as inexplicably as Soulja Boy. These new cinematic attractions and their haptically conjured afterlives offer richly embedded instances of folded time, layered on top of and against one another, resisting the allure of linear time even as they exhaust the energies of producers and consumers alike (and we are all both). They mark the age(ing) of the medium itself: YouTube as a platform may not survive the decade, but it has already exerted considerable influence on the “mediality” of audiovisual production in the new millennium.⁷² If “this haptic stuff [i’m] writing abt” has any relevance beyond

⁷¹ Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 60-61.

⁷² Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 9-10.

its own immediate focus, I hope it may prod us toward rethinking time in an age of the strange corporeality of YouTube cinematics.

YouTube Browse

Soulja Boy Tell'em - Crank That (Soulja Boy)

SUBSCRIBE NOW 19 videos

KID CUDI FEAT. KING CHIP
"JUST WHAT I AM"

Like

130,524,260

Uploaded by SouljaBoyTell'emVEVO on Nov 22, 2009
Music video by Soulja Boy Tell'em performing Crank That (Soulja Boy). (C) 2007 Collipark Music/HHH/Interscope Records

140,414 likes, 30,349 dislikes
Artist: Soulja Boy
Buy "Crank That (Soulja Boy) (Clean)" on:
Google Play, iTunes, AmazonMP3

Show more

Like

130,524,260

Video statistics

Views and discovery

130,524,260 Views

Key discovery events

- A** First referral from YouTube search: [crank that](#)
Dec 7, 2009 - 1,144,330 views
- B** First referral from related video: [Soulja Boy Tell'em - Kiss Me Thru The Phone ft. Sammie](#)
Dec 7, 2009 - 1,243,426 views

Show more events

Engagement

- 88,557 Comments
- 0 Favorites
- 140,413 Likes
- 30,349 Dislikes

Audience

Top locations

- United States
- Brazil
- United Kingdom

Top demographics

- Female, 13-17 years
- Male, 13-17 years
- Male, 18-24 years

Uploaded by SouljaBoyTell'emVEVO on Nov 22, 2009
Music video by Soulja Boy Tell'em performing Crank That (Soulja Boy). (C) 2007 Collipark Music/HHH/Interscope Records

140,414 likes, 30,349 dislikes
Artist: Soulja Boy
Buy "Crank That (Soulja Boy) (Clean)" on:
Google Play, iTunes, AmazonMP3

Figure 1. Soulja Boy Tell'em, Crank That (Soulja Boy), author's screenshots, November 6, 2012

YouTube

PSY - GANGNAM STYLE (강남스타일) MV

PSY 43 videos



0:08 / 4:13

665,593,850

Published on Jul 15, 2012 by officialpsy | #1 on the YouTube 100

PSY - Gangnam Style (강남스타일)

- ▶ NOW available on iTunes: <http://Smarturl.it/psygangnam>
- ▶ Official PSY Online Store US & International : <http://psy.shop.bravadosa.com/>
- ▶ About PSY from YG Ent.: <http://smarturl.it/YGfamilyAboutPSY>
- ▶ PSY's Products on eBay: <http://stores.ebay.com/ygentertainment>
- ▶ YG-eShop: <http://www.ygeshop.com>

The Artist Store

Gangnam Style (강남스타일)

For More Information @

665,593,850

Video statistics

Views and discovery



665,593,850 Views

Key discovery events

- (A) First referral from YouTube search: [psy](#)
Jul 15, 2012 - 9,592,741 views
- (B) First referral from YouTube search: [psy gangnam style](#)
Jul 15, 2012 - 17,482,867 views

Engagement

- 2,749,822** Comments
- 0** Favorites
- 4,890,134** Likes
- 273,383** Dislikes

Audience

Top demographics

- Female, 13-17 years
- Male, 13-17 years
- Male, 18-24 years

Published on Jul 15, 2012 by officialpsy | #1 on the YouTube 100

PSY - Gangnam Style (강남스타일)

- ▶ NOW available on iTunes: <http://Smarturl.it/psygangnam>
- ▶ Official PSY Online Store US & International : <http://psy.shop.bravadosa.com/>
- ▶ About PSY from YG Ent.: <http://smarturl.it/YGfamilyAboutPSY>
- ▶ PSY's Products on eBay: <http://stores.ebay.com/ygentertainment>
- ▶ YG-eShop: <http://www.ygeshop.com>

The Artist Store

Gangnam Style (강남스타일)

For More Information @

<http://www.facebook.com/officialpsy>
http://twitter.com/psy_opa
http://twitter.com/ygent_official
<http://me2day.net/psyfive>

Figure 2. Psy, Gangan Style, author's screenshots, November 6, 2012

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