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# 9

## **Katy Perry's "Wide Awake": The Lyric Video as Genre**

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# “Wide Awake”: Becoming aroused to the possibilities of a new genre

Official lyric videos entered the mainstream in 2010. Katy Perry can be seen as a frontrunner in this trend since she was not only an early adopter of the genre but, at the time of this study, had consistently released lyric videos for most of her singles over the past eight years. Over the course of seven years and sixteen lyric videos, Perry has experimented with all three elements of lyric video—music, lyrics, and images—and has also introduced innovative and influential practices to the genre.

To illustrate the elements of the lyric video genre, I have selected one of Katy Perry’s lyric videos, “Wide Awake,”<sup>79</sup> from her 2012 album *Teenage Dream: The Complete Confection* (referred to hereafter as *TD:CC*). Although it is an early example of the genre, the video exemplifies many of the key genre elements that have remained constant throughout the development of the lyric video, while also revealing how this new genre encourages innovative narrative techniques.

“Wide Awake” is organized around a Facebook timeline from 2012. The timeline runs down the middle of the screen, with text bubbles emerging out of points on that line. The text bubbles alternate between the lyrics of “Wide Awake” and genuine posts from Perry’s official Facebook page from 2010 to early 2012 (Figure 9.1).

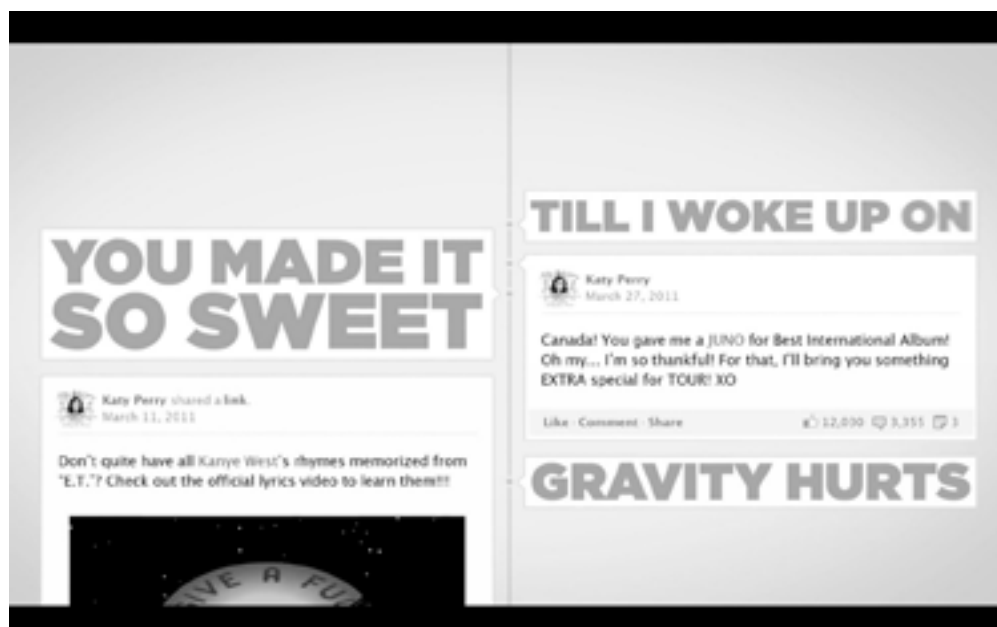
This video constructs a fictional space by combining two worlds that are often separated: the internal emotions and thoughts as expressed in the lyrics and the public social media posts. These posts, drawn directly from Perry’s official artist Facebook page, outline her professional success, by systematically highlighting and celebrating the promotion and triumphs of her last album, thus presenting an image of achievement and overall happiness. The lyrics, however, communicate a much more somber story of heartache and disillusionment. They appear word-by-word in time as they are sung. The pale blue font still manages to draw the viewer’s eye from promotional posts due to the large block capital letters, which jump out as they appear in their own text boxes connected to the



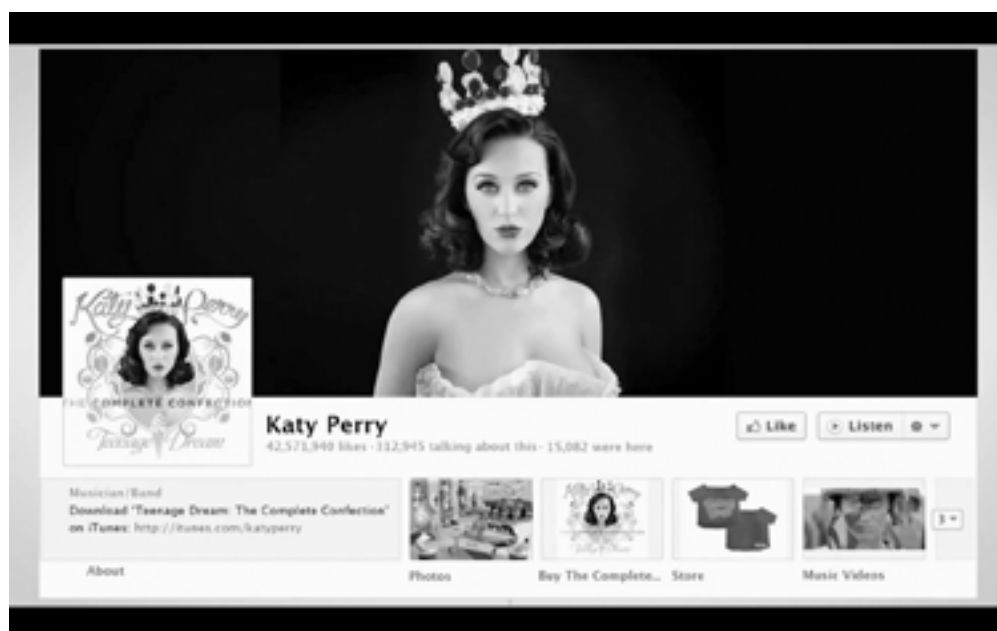
**Figure 9.1** “Wide Awake” title screen (0:03).

timeline (Figure 9.2). When interspersed with the Facebook posts, the combined effect creates a dichotomy between the internal voice of the lyrics, and what is now understood to be a false front concealing this turmoil. While social media is commonly assumed to be truthful, and song lyrics sometimes understood as fictional stories, this lyric video seems to suggest the opposite: that the social media posts do not reveal Perry’s authentic reality, whereas the lyrics are honest about her real-life experiences. This innovative juxtaposition mobilizes the lyric video genre to explore a storyworld in which the line between private and public is blurred. The video requires the viewer to absorb the meaning of both the lyrics and the social media posts simultaneously as the timeline continuously “scrolls” up, imitating the never-ending social media loop that many people look at every day.

“Wide Awake” is transparently positioned within both industry patterns and cultural contexts. By setting the lyrics on a Facebook timeline, it situates itself within the world of social media, with which almost all viewers will be familiar. The timeline depicted in the lyric video is not a personal Facebook account, but rather a promotional site for Perry’s public persona. It does not include many personal posts, but instead outlines her many successes as a pop artist and appearance as a guest actress on *How I Met Your Mother*. Her profile picture is the album cover for *TD:CC* rather than a candid photo (Figure 9.3). Owing to these stylistic choices, the lyric video for “Wide Awake” becomes not only promotion for the single, but also an advertisement for every other lyric video, music video, and public performance that she had released during that two-year period. Multiple times throughout the video viewers are invited to “watch the video below.” While it is only a recreation of a Facebook feed and thus contains no active links to those videos, the content that is being promoted is real, and spectators can seek it out elsewhere if they want to.



**Figure 9.2** “Wide Awake” lyrics mixed with promotional Facebook posts (1:49).



**Figure 9.3** “Wide Awake” final screen revealing the Facebook profile (3:42).

Highly relevant to the cultural understanding of “Wide Awake” is the fact that, in the two years between the releases of *Teenage Dream* (2010) and *TD:CC* (2012), Perry married and divorced the well-known British comedian, Russell Brand. “Wide Awake” is largely received as a personal declaration of disappointment and grief following her short fourteen-month marriage.<sup>80</sup> Although their romantic relationship is never depicted in

the lyric video and the lyrical content alludes to heartbreak in a broad sense, spectators who have followed her career and her personal life are able to understand that the song is about more than a general disillusionment—it is also specifically about a failed romantic relationship.

By depicting the intimate lyrics as an invitation into Perry's life, the final post in the video announces her upcoming documentary *KATY PERRY: PART OF ME* (2012), which offers her fans an even more intimate glance into her personal life, including moments revealing the disintegration of her marriage. Therefore, not only is this lyric video promoting "Wide Awake," it is promoting her earlier music videos, lyric videos, television appearances, albums, singles, and the upcoming film. By advertising so much content from different media types and genres in a single lyric video and imitating a social media feed, this video is an exemplary example of media convergence.<sup>81</sup> Perry additionally relies on the participatory culture of her fans to actively seek out that content through various media platforms.<sup>82</sup>

The overall message of disillusionment in the song can be summarized in its own lyrics: "everything you see / ain't always what it seems." Through the lyric video, Perry is visually able to "amplify" this meaning as it "introduces new meanings that do not conflict with the lyrics, but that add layers of meaning," thus offering a more in-depth message and visually illustrating a larger narrative than is suggested in the song alone by presenting three distinct façades in the video: (1) her personal heartbreak and disillusionment; (2) the false front of social media; and (3) her own artistic persona, which only reveals a small part of her identity.<sup>83</sup>

First, and most relevant to the song itself, is the dichotomy she presents between her public professional success and her personal anguish, previously concealed from the public. This is laid out clearly through the setting of the mournful lyrics against the positive promotional Facebook posts. By inserting the lyrics between the authentic social media posts, Perry reveals a dichotomy between what she was presenting to the public and what she was really experiencing during that period of time.

Second, using the style of the Facebook timeline to connect the two types of posts offers an additional interpretation: that social media can be a false front. Utilizing the promotional posts in contrast to the emotional lyrics offers a commentary, or critique, on how social media is often used. Here Perry is, perhaps, inviting her audience to realize that a person's social media life does not often reflect their reality and, while they may seem happy and fulfilled, there is often heartache that does not get posted online.

Finally, by acknowledging her own participation in this kind of mediated social media presence, and by lyrically referencing melancholy moments that were not shared through social media at the time, Perry's vulnerability and somber presentation broaden our understanding of her "performance persona," and how it was constructed through her songs and videos.<sup>84</sup> Up to this point, Perry's constructed person was a fun, quirky, energetic pop star whose most well-known songs were "Ur So Gay," "I Kissed a Girl," and "Teenage Dream." Due to the lyrical content in these songs, she was often seen as a superficial or juvenile starlet, who used her gender and sexuality to draw attention from fans and critics alike. The lyric video demonstrates this through the many Facebook posts and videos,

where Perry is habitually surrounded by bright colors and candy, with her femininity and sexuality emphasized. Meanwhile, everything surrounding these social media posts contrasts with those images, through the plain, pale blue font, highlighting the somber and vulnerable aspects of her persona.

Drawing intertextual connections between the lyric video and the official music video reinforces themes of disillusionment and Perry's softer persona.<sup>85</sup> Although the two videos may seem drastically different on the surface, both videos for "Wide Awake" tell a complementary narrative of personal struggles being hidden behind public successes. As with the lyric video, the music video refers to specific events from Perry's professional history by depicting Perry filming the music video for "California Gurls" and emerging onstage to sing "Teenage Dream." Her journey between these two events is much more theatrical, as she journeys with her younger self through a dark maze, overcoming frightening obstacles and avoiding deceptive traps. The visual juxtaposition between the bright and energetic performance scenes and the dark scenes of her mythical journey mirrors the contrasts of the pale blue text with the colorful Facebook posts in the lyric video. By highlighting these different versions of Perry's persona, both videos insinuate that she is aware of the colorful construction of her public image; the lyric video in particular invites the viewers into her personal narrative. Of course, these videos, along with the documentary that the lyric video promotes, are carefully constructed to create this idea of maturity and genuineness.

## Conclusion

Through this close reading of the "Wide Awake" lyric video, I have demonstrated how lyric videos can be used to convey a personal message, to offer a social critique through an amplification of the lyrical content, to shape an artist's persona, or to explore a range of audiovisual effects that are available within this new visual genre. My hope is that this chapter inspires academic attention to be given to the study of lyric video, and provides a foundation for future research. Incorporating lyric video analysis into popular music and digital media scholarship can provide additional insight into artistic performance, lyrical meaning, artistic persona, identity representations, and genre aesthetics.

## Notes

- 1 Hugh McIntyre, "The MTV Video Music Awards Go for the Second Screen Experience," *Forbes*, August 21, 2014.
- 2 Kevin O'Keefe, "Where Did All These Lyric Videos Come From and Why Are We Giving Them Awards," *Atlantic*, August 14, 2014.
- 3 Katy Perry, "Katy Perry—Wide Awake (Lyric Video)," YouTube video (3:46), music video, posted by "Katy Perry," May 20, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3D5FwwtNVM>.