HD **The view from the couch: Three decades of music videos**

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I remember 1987 well. It was the year my parents split up, and the year that Rage first appeared on our screens. I must have begun watching Rage during its first year of broadcast on the ABC, sitting in my dad's flat, on a small colour TV that (in my memory) only screened in black and white. Until very recently I presumed that the show was older. Right from the beginning Rage had an ageless, mysterious quality, as if it were transmitting, uninterrupted, from a distant galaxy. It runs for so many hours on Friday and Saturday nights that it seems everlasting – has anyone ever succeeded in watching an entire episode from beginning to end? There is a generosity of spirit tucked inside the show's austere format; in the pre-internet era it was one of very few media forms that seemed superabundant. There's no regular host, no kindly narrator to tell you what's coming next, but there are always more video clips, and more, and then more.

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Four or five hours in, as you give up and succumb to television-saturated dreams, you haven't made it even halfway through – and in the decade or so before the Rage playlists were published online, you wouldn't know what you might be missing. Who can tell what musical epiphanies, still undiscovered, were lost to sleep during those weekends long ago?

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Music video is a strange, beguiling format – part advertisement, part short film, or, as Melbourne-based director Nastasha Pincus describes it to me, "a hybrid between video art and narrative cinema, but on a really tiny canvas". More than any other media form over the past 30 years, it has succeeded in shaping the currents of popular music. In 2013, videos from Robin Thicke, Miley Cyrus, Lily Allen and Kanye West alone generated enough opinion pieces and social media spats – not to mention parody versions – to keep online debate churning for weeks at a time. Beyoncé, pop's reigning superstar, released a self-titled "visual album" – including a video for each of 14 songs – shortly before Christmas without any prior publicity, and **sold** one million copies worldwide in six days.

In a digital age, the music video is instantly and constantly accessible, viewed on laptops, tablets and smartphones. It must nevertheless cut through a visual surfeit of memes, online tutorials and cats doing cute things. "Every song will have a video," Pincus predicts, "but you have to wonder what kind of videos that will yield as an art form, and what practices will develop in that economic landscape, as a result." As I write, the video that Pincus directed for Gotye's 2011 smash 'Somebody That I Used To Know' has been viewed 463,599,004 times on YouTube – a truly mind-boggling number – but the video she remains most proud of, for Missy Higgins' 'Everyone's Waiting', has received a comparatively low 688,476 views on the same **site**. "It's not someone naked in the shower or some brand-new technology," she says. "It's just a really good story well told, and it's disheartening to think that it's not enough."

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In the popular imagination, music video seems inextricably linked with the industry excesses of the 1980s, when major labels might budget a million dollars or more for a clip. Australian director Russell Mulcahy did as much as anyone to set the tone: his videos for Duran Duran, in particular, are a giddy catalogue of tropical beaches and linen suits, holiday fantasies for the couch-bound. The Buggles' 'Video Killed the Radio Star', which Mulcahy directed, was the very first music video shown on MTV, the US cable channel that began broadcasting in August 1981 and redefined the relationship between musicians and their audiences. Radio play was no longer enough; what counted was the moving image. For some, MTV ushered in a shallow age of preening haircut bands whose manicured presentation far outweighed the artistry of their songs – but this is too reductive. Popular music and image-making have always gone hand in hand. Would Elvis Presley have gone onstage in a sweatshirt?

Spectacle: The music video exhibition, on show at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne until 23 February, gathers several forerunners to the music video as we know it, including glass slides, printed with song lyrics, that were projected onto cinema screens to aid in **group** singalongs. (You can see today's equivalent in the countless "lyric" videos on YouTube.) "Soundies", like Jack O'Hagan singing 'Along the Road to Gundagai' in 1931, would be screened before the main feature; we often think of music video as a televisual form, but its origins lie in cinema and, as ACMI curator Fiona Trigg explains, "music videos have a really interesting relationship to the whole of cinema history. They're a little bit like ads in that they float free from the traditions of narrative, but they are a place where filmmakers and artists can have a play with techniques, film references and new technologies." Trigg and fellow curator Amita Kirpalani worked with Rage producers to add local content, like O'Hagan's performance, to Spectacle, which was originally exhibited at the Cincinnati Art Centre in 2012.

For aficionados of the medium such as Natasha Pincus, music video really began to come of age during the 1990s. "Spike Jonze and that generation of visionary directors really revolutionised music video for me," she says. 'Sabotage', directed by Jonze for the Beastie Boys in 1994, is a stone-cold classic of the form, a perfect Starsky & Hutch parody distilled into three minutes, and one of the most requested videos on Rage. Jonze and his contemporary Michel Gondry brought new levels of visual imagination and technical ingenuity, often moving back and forth between feature film and music video. Gondry's video for Kylie Minogue's 2001 song 'Come into My World', featured at ACMI, takes place on one Parisian block; every time Kylie completes a circuit, another Kylie emerges, until four of them are walking together in the midst of an ever-replicating streetscape.

ABC interoffice memo, 15/10/74, 'Countdown' Security Measures:

"The programme 'Countdown' is to be an audience participation show featuring a number of prominent Pop Groups and Solo Performers known to produce hysterical behaviour amongst their teenage devotees. Consequently, careful security measures are to be taken on Saturday afternoons when recordings are being made."

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Before Rage – and long before MTV – there was Countdown, which aired on ABC television from November 1974 until July 1987. It was, as Fiona Trigg says, an "incredibly important" show, particularly for overseas acts who might baulk at the cost of an Australian tour. "If a band had a great clip that really worked well on Countdown, they would increase their record sales," she says, "and then be able to justify a tour here, which would further their career." Spectacle displays a handful of Countdown memorabilia, including the above memo, and a series of clips that are a testament to the show's good-natured chaos. Daryl Braithwaite, resplendent in a shiny purple suit, is yanked offstage by an over-eager fan. The show's host, Molly Meldrum, struggles to get sensible answers out of Iggy Pop, a notoriously unhinged Solo Performer. "Hiya, dawg face!" the singer yelps, as Meldrum tries to keep him in his seat. Then Iggy stuffs a microphone down his trousers.

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At some point my dad upgraded his TV and routed the audio signal through his hi-fi system. With the copyright-flouting bliss born of youth and thriftiness, I could compile cassette mixes of my favourite songs by lifting the audio tracks from my library of home-recorded Rage tapes. Music video and VHS were a match made in heaven. There once existed a roaring trade in VHS bootlegs that collected an artist's music videos and television appearances together; with each copy the audio and video quality would degrade just a little more, until, eight or nine generations down the track, you might as well have been viewing the screen through a blizzard while wearing sunglasses. Still, you'd keep watching.

Later still, as an adolescent, I'd stay awake into the early hours and attempt to photograph certain videos as they rolled through the analogue screen, extracting ghostly, blurred stills from the moving images. I'm not certain what I was looking for, all those nights crouched quietly behind a camera tripod; in part, I think, it was a search for material evidence of the power that music had over me. If I could stare at the photographs, or pin them to my wall, or make new artworks from them, then perhaps the transformative yet fleeting hold of a great song would stay with me permanently.

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A video, Pincus notes, can stick to its performer "like glue". Certain clips have become iconic: Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' (1983), obviously, but also Sinead O'Connor with two tears rolling down her perfect, elfin face in 'Nothing Compares 2 U' (1990), or Bob Dylan, in an early precursor to the contemporary music video, riffling through cue cards in DA Pennebaker's 1965 short for 'Subterranean Homesick Blues'. Nirvana's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' (1991) became a generational marker not because the song was playlisted on **commercial** radio (it wasn't), but because the accompanying video, filmed in a swampy

palette of yellows and browns, replete with mosh pit, anarchic cheerleaders, and a final, startling close-up of Kurt Cobain's snarling face, was so utterly at odds with the prevailing visual aesthetic. As Samuel Bayer, the clip's director, recalls in I Want My MTV, an oral history of the channel, "I've been on 200 music video sets since, and that was the best performance I've ever seen."

What does it take to coax a compelling on-camera performance out of a musician – a professional entertainer, but very rarely a trained actor? "A lot!" laughs Pincus, who describes the intensive rehearsal process, rare for music video, that she undertakes with her musicians. "We do all sorts of stuff," she says. "We'll look at the lyrics like a script; we'll break it down, we'll deliver the line. We'll look at the facial performance, the body performance – we'll compose it and then break it down again. We'll do theatre games. We'll be in my **apartment** eating **Chinese** food until late, crying together about our lost ones – it's anything and everything."

Filming for Gotye's 'Somebody That I Used To Know' – a video that combines stop-motion animation and body painting, two notoriously labour-intensive art forms – took three days; the third day lasted 26 hours. The results could have ended up gimmicky, but the final clip, which Pincus edited herself, is elegant, and never overwhelms the emotion of the song. "These people are very smart, very ambitious, they want the best for themselves and their work," says Pincus of the musicians she has worked with. "They'll work tirelessly in preproduction and rehearsal, they'll give you a hundred takes. I can't imagine a single artist I've worked with turning around and saying, 'You've got one more [take] and then I'm done.'"

Apart from Gotye and Kimbra's performances – and, of course, the song – Pincus credits social media for the popularity of her video, which went on to win an ARIA and a Melbourne Design Award. "Everyone posted it," she says, "as a way of engaging with social media. The combination of the newness of Facebook and the tool of YouTube together helped this happen." The video's runaway success, she adds, has sometimes made her feel guilty. "I see so much amazing work that's as good or better, and it gets ignored." Online platforms like YouTube may have mitigated the geographical distance between Australian musicians and international audiences, but now the challenge is to be discovered at all, amid the infinite distractions on offer. "The hurdle of too much content is greater than the previous hurdle of being in Australia," she says.

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On a warm, early summer's morning, I visit the Rage studio, located on the fourth floor of the ABC's Ultimo building in a wing that also houses First Tuesday Book Club and At the Movies. As I suspected, the modesty of the show's actual set-up belies its outsized influence upon my life: it occupies all of two rooms. The famous Rage couch, upholstered in vivid red, sits modestly in the hallway, where it rests between shoots. In the midst of my tour I overhear the husky tones of At the Movies host Margaret Pomeranz as she passes by, and I resist the urge to lean out the door and gawk at her earrings. Pomeranz and her co-host David Stratton were Rage guest programmers in August of last year. "A huge show," says Tyson Koh, one of two current Rage producers. "All the videos they picked were made by directors who had also directed feature films, and it was great to see that connection."

MTV may be synonymous with the music video, but today the channel screens very little musical content, relying instead on the enormous popularity of reality shows like Punk'd and Jersey Shore. Rage isn't a global brand name, but it is a globally unique show, which for 27 years has put music video "front and centre", as Koh describes it, and on a budget that probably wouldn't cover MTV's weekly catering bill. Koh and his fellow producer, Maurice Branscombe, who is carefully logging new videos into the Rage database when I visit, are responsible for every aspect of the show, from choosing content to filming the guest programmers. "We look after publicity, we look after the social media, all of our mail-outs, we do it all ourselves," Koh says. "The show takes on this lo-fi quality because we are spread a little bit thin, but we manage to make it happen."

For his part, Koh sees the role of Rage in an era of YouTube as little different to the show's original intention: to introduce viewers to great music. "There's a lot of stuff we have that's not on YouTube," he says. "That's how deep our archives go." As Koh points out, navigating the labyrinth of YouTube still requires you to generate search requests – on Rage, the selection and sequencing are done for you, illuminating the connections between videos, prompting accidental discoveries. It's like an all-night video mixtape compiled by bona-fide music nerds.

I ask to see the legendary, possibly apocryphal, Rage directory, and am handed a red, spiral-bound folder the size of a telephone book. So it does exist! Page after page, ordered alphabetically by artist, catalogues the show's holdings, though these days, Koh explains, most guest programmers are sent spreadsheets. New videos are added to the Rage database at the rate of roughly 2000 a year – as soon as it's printed, the hard copy catalogue is effectively out of date.

Inside Koh's office is a whiteboard filled with names of guest programmers past, present and potential – the British scientist (and part-time keyboardist) Brian Cox and Countdown's own Molly Meldrum are two names on the latter list. Whether they're musicians or industry veterans, says Koh, a Rage guest programmer must perform well on camera and have stories to tell, bringing to the show "a unique perspective on music". My heart sinks. My life's crowning ambition – to program Rage – is crumbling into dust, there inside the ABC building. Is it too late to become a rock star?

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In the 'Remix' section of Spectacle, the music video is dismantled and then stuck back together via smartphones and home editing software. Crowd-sourced videos, fan tributes, hilarious "literal" versions that rewrite a song's lyrics as a direct commentary on the clip itself – this is where "we see the form break apart", says Amita Kirpalani. She describes the ever-proliferating versions of, for instance, Beyoncé's 2008 'Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)' as "democratic, and I love that being a counterpoint to some of the more over-the-top, epic projects that are in the show". There are 'Single Ladies' flash mobs, wedding dances and talent-show auditions. At the opposite end of the exhibition, the original video plays on a 4-metre screen.

"People watching might not be aware of this," says Fiona Trigg, "but that clip is drawing upon a whole tradition of musical film, back to Fred Astaire and the whole Busby Berkeley thing of showing dancers in a full frame." At the same time, it is an entirely contemporary piece of film, the visual simplicity of which – Beyoncé and two backing dancers filmed in black and white, inside an infinity cove – translates powerfully to a small format. "People aren't going to see it on a big screen in a gallery, for the most part," says Trigg. "They're going to see it on a screen in their hand."

I ask Natasha Pincus if she directs music videos with this in mind. "Definitely," she says. "The cuts and everything feel different, depending on if you're viewing it in a cinema environment, or in your home on a television, or on an iPad. Atmospherically, psychologically, they're completely distinct, and to make one video which works across all of those is really tough." She tries not to let this shape her creative decisions, but she does, for example, have to colour-grade separately for YouTube and television – like MP3 music files, online video is a highly compressed format.

Back at Rage, producers welcomed in the 21st century during 2012 by converting the title captions for every video from floppy disk storage to an internal server. Time moves slowly at the ABC, and new video submissions must still be delivered in hard copy; blue Betacam cassette cases are stacked up around the studio. "I'm someone who's very keen on constantly improving and updating," says Tyson Koh, "but there are several elements to the show that just can't be changed, and I don't think anyone would want them to change, whether that be the credits or the theme tune." The show's closing theme, a version of Simple Minds' 'Speed Your Love to Me', reveals the show's mid-'80s origins – and puts me inside my dad's car, where the song's parent album, 1984's Sparkle in the Rain, would be blasting on cassette tape as he drove my brother and me back to our mum's house after access visits.

Towards the end of my time at Rage, Koh and Branscombe suggest an impromptu photo shoot. They carry the red couch into Branscombe's office, which doubles as the show's set, and switch on the studio lights. I whip out my phone. A selfie on the Rage couch: it's as close to programming the show as I'm ever going to come, but it's closer than most. And what would be my opening salvo for the Rage gig of my dreams? The Cure's 'Charlotte Sometimes', of course. It's the worst music video ever made.

ART Wally De Backer (aka Gotye) with a still from the 'Somebody That I Used To Know' video. © Mark Gamboni / ACMI

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