

Cover Sheet

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An Exploration of Mainstream Filmmakers in the Music Video World

The evolution of the cinematic music video

“A cinematic picture is one that gives an intimation or suggestion of a story or narrative” (McIver, 2016. p.8).

The art of the modern music video is one that has grown and evolved greatly over time. Since the first short films set to music in the 1930's, music videos have been used not only as a marketing tool, but to reflect pop culture and important social issues of the time (Hans, 2020). With the launch of MTV in 1981, music videos were propelled into the homes of many, thus creating a space for many aspiring film creators to launch their careers (Lobad, 2021). In fact, a great deal of the most successful film directors we see today began their journeys in the music video industry. Music videos evolved from simple performance videos to short films with storylines. In this essay I will be exploring the links between music videos and the film world, the works of David Fincher and John Landis, their work with Michael Jackson and the impact these videos made on pop culture.

I was first drawn to explore this topic by David Fincher's music video for *Judith* by A Perfect Circle. Created in 2000 between releases of *Fight Club* and *Panic Room*, *Judith* is very representative of Fincher's style of the period (Beyl, 2016). With a desaturated colour palette and dirty grain, it is a far cry from his music video work prior to focusing on feature films.



Figure1. *Fight Club* - David Fincher (1999)

Prior to his film debut in 1992 with *Alien 3*, Fincher had a well established career in music video and commercial work through Propaganda Films, a company he co-founded with fellow producers and directors . They sought to innovate the music video and commercial industries, whilst bridging the gap in production quality between these and feature films, and by 1990 were producing almost a third of all US music videos (Wikipedia, 2022).

“We were the first company that wanted to apply the principals of the commercial industry to music videos... [and] we wanted to take the aesthetics of music videos and apply them to commercials.” (Gold, n.d.). (Linnett, 1999).



Figure 2. *Seven* - David Fincher (1995)

By the time Propaganda closed in 2002, Fincher already had over 50 music videos and 5 feature films under his belt. Whilst his music videos in the late 80's and early 90's had a distinctive colour grade, with vibrant blues and yellows and desaturated reds, his feature films have more of a cool yellow/brown tone to them. He also uses monochromatic and discordant colour palettes to invoke emotions in the viewer; “You have a responsibility for the way you make an audience feel, and I want them to feel uncomfortable.” (Fincher, n.d., Vasiliauskas, 2020).

Whilst there is little information available on whether these ideas were used for *Judith*, they align with the resentful themes of the song. As for light, Fincher consistently compresses whites



Figure 3. A Perfect Circle - *Judith* (2000)

without crushing the details from the blacks. Highlights are often tinted to mirror the emotion of the scene (Nedomansky, 2013). He also often utilises low-key lighting with strong shadows in his films (Konda, 2020), an effect seen in many music videos, including *Judith*.



Figure 4. Vanity Kills - *Heresy* (2022)

I feel hugely inspired to emulate Fincher's use of colour and light in my future work. I have used similar colour palettes in my edits for *Heresy* by Vanity Kills (music video) and *Self[less]* (short film) but the idea of tinting whites to match an emotion is one I would like to experiment with.

Up until this point, I've struggled with matching colour grades and emotion, opting for an overall tint. I think that by only tinting the highlights you can compliment the feel without distracting from the story. In upcoming work I also plan to use colour burns and light leaks similar to those seen in *Judith*.

For my next example I want to focus more specifically on linking one film and music video; John Landis's *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) and Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (1983).



Figure 5. *An American Werewolf in London* - John Landis (1981)

When *An American Werewolf in London* was released in 1981 it changed the horror comedy genre. Whilst comedy had been incorporated into horrors before (Una O'Connor's roles in *The Invisible Man* (1933) and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) come to mind), it hadn't really been combined with gory, gross-out horror. Landis had originally written the screenplay in 1969 but put it to one side until he had built himself a reputation in the film world. The story had been considered "either too scary to be funny, or too funny to be scary" (Robey, 2016). However, once released, the film not only paved the way for other horror comedies, such as *Gremlins* (1984), *Beetlejuice* (1988) and later, *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), it also set a new standard for makeup effects in Hollywood. The practical special effects were so well received, in fact, that Rick Baker won the first Academy Award for Best Makeup (Anderson, 2022).

It was these achievements that caught Michael Jackson's eye and lead him to contact Landis with a proposal to create a music video for *Thriller* in 1983. Landis had not previously directed a music video but agreed to do on the basis that it could be a short film (Hebblethwaite, 2013).



Figure 6. *Thriller* - Michael Jackson (1983)

The music video utilised much of the same creative team as had been involved with *An American Werewolf in London*, with a special request for Rick Baker as makeup artist (Wikipedia, 2022). Jackson had not been familiar with Landis' previous films, which had been comedies, but was struck by the monster metamorphosis in *An American Werewolf in London*.

Whilst Jackson's eventual transformation scene has many similarities to the original's, the creature itself was unique, with Baker saying:

"We made him into more of a werecat because I just didn't want to do another werewolf... At first I was thinking [it would be] almost like a black panther thing, but ... I ended up putting a longer mane of hair on it and bigger ears." (Romano, 2018").



Figure 7. *Thriller* - Michael Jackson (1983)

Whilst the cinematography and colour grades between *Thriller* and *An American Werewolf in London* are not particularly similar, with *Thriller* using much more vibrant tones within the dark setting (perhaps because it was filmed in LA as opposed to the rainy Welsh countryside and London streets), the similarities lie in the special effects and the lasting impact both would have. Jackson approached *Thriller* as a film;

“I wanted something that would *glue* you to the set, something you’d want to watch over and over... On set I explained we were doing a *film*... I wanted the most talented people in the business.” (Jackson, 2009. p.135)

Jackson sought to create more than just a music video, and he achieved this, not only because the video runs for almost 14 minutes or because it cost and unheard of \$900,000 to make (\$25,000 over the original budget), but because it made an impact on pop culture like none had before. It changed the market for black artists. In the 1970’s, black artists would predominantly be marketed to a black audience, and Jackson aimed to market his work to the masses (Mitchell, 2009). With *Thriller*, Jackson broke down racial and cultural barriers that had previously denied black artists the opportunity to be widely shown on platforms such as MTV (Legacy, 2019). Landis had previously fought for diversity in his films, especially on *An American Werewolf in London* (Anderson, 2022), making the pair a strong match and a force to be reckoned with.

Both of these directors have very different styles, however both have made an impact on the film and music video industries. In comparison, their careers have taken different paths. Where Fincher began with music videos and commercials, Landis has predominantly been a film director and strayed into the music world by request. Where is the link?

Michael Jackson.

Both worked with him on two very differently styled videos but both managed to capture two different sides of his personality; wonderfully creative and painfully melancholic. Fincher directed *Who Is it* in 1992 towards the end of his music video career, the same year as his first feature film, *Alien 3*. As much as this video does not stand out from Jackson’s other pieces and could be seen as dull in comparison to epics such as *Black and White* (1991), *Bad* (1987) and *Remember the Time* (1992), it sparked the thought; were there any big directors in Hollywood in the 1980’s and 90’s who didn’t shoot a video with Jackson? After all, according

to *Rolling Stone* “no single artist has shaped, innovated or *defined* the medium of “music video” more than Michael Jackson”.

After exploring the way Jackson approaches music videos as films, I feel inspired to elevate my own work. Whilst I am personally more interested in music videos as a medium as opposed to films, I love the idea of combining the two. Often, it is a challenge to carry a storyline in a music video without dialogue, the stories are hugely simplified. However, by adding additional scenes you can open up a world of possibilities for storytelling, the opportunity to say so much more and engage your audience, drawing them into the worlds created by the artist. This is not only exciting as a filmmaker, but provides a deeper line of connection between the artist and audience.

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