The recent rise in scholarship on music videos parallels the growing importance of the music video itself. In the United States, music video finally eclipsed the audio format in 2018, with more than half of all streaming audio in the form of music videos. A recent estimate puts that number as high as 55%, the overwhelming majority from YouTube alone (https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/more-music-is-played-on-youtube-than-on-spotify-apple-music-and-every-audio-streaming-platform-combined/). For the first time in recent history, the dominant recorded musical medium is no longer purely audio. With so much of today’s music being conceived in the video format (e.g. Beyoncé’s 2020 Black is King and Janelle Monáe’s 2018 Dirty Computer), the study of ‘popular music’ is now likely to include reference to music video.

The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music Video Analysis is a fine place for scholars to start learning new tools for the analysis of this dominant musical platform, and to discover how tools they might already use to analyse gender, sexuality and race might prove even more fruitful when the visual medium is duly considered. The collection aims to ‘draw special attention to the ways in which music videos operate, the range of mediation strategies that are available, their cultural impact, aspects of the creative production process, and the aesthetic materials that shape their complex narratives, subjectivities, and social identities’ (p. 8).

The introduction starts by tracing the history of music videos, from the debut of MTV in the early 1980s. Though Andrew Goodwin (1992, p. 30) famously called the search for music video’s true beginnings a ‘fruitless exercise’, several scholars trace its history much earlier to what Mathias Bonde Korsgaard here calls the ‘pre-televisual phase’ (p. 15). The editors summarise the state of affairs today as ‘evolving assemblages of music technology such as mp3 sound files, mp3 players, smartphones, and tablets’ (p. 2). This needs an update. I downloaded mp3 files through file sharing sites in order to load them onto my mp3 player in college, nearly 20 years ago. My teenage students, who consume music video through Tik-Tok, social media and streaming services, find mp3 files clunky and antiquated.
Editors Burns and Hawkins express the scope of the collection succinctly: these ‘writings emanate from the fields of popular music studies, media studies, film theory, cultural studies, gender studies, critical discourse analysis, and sociology’ (p. 3). Their dizzying account of the breadth of topics explored in the collection is described as the impact of recent developments in music video production and distribution upon music consumption and reception; the significance of audiovisual expression for cultural and political identities and lifestyles; the influence of multimedia technologies and aesthetics upon the world-building strategies of popular music artists; and the application of theoretical approaches from various disciplinary perspectives for the critical analysis of audiovisual discourses.

According to Burns and Hawkins, ‘it is the diversity of approaches and the case studies themselves that verify the need for ongoing research in the burgeoning field of music video studies’ (p. 7). While I agree, the methods espoused throughout the 20 essays raise questions about what it means to analyse music videos. In this review, I address three in turn.

**Question 1**

Should the music video scholar assume that the reader has taken the time to watch the video(s) analysed in their writing? What assumptions about reader/listener/viewer reception should the music-video scholar make?

Music scholars from a number of disciplines, including ethnomusicology, historical musicology and especially music theory, are accustomed to the luxury of reproducing the essential melodic, harmonic, contrapuntal, rhythmic and metric attributes of their object of study directly on the page through musical notation. Putting aside the question of whether musical notation accurately represents music, it certainly represents more of sounding music than a screengrab does of a music video. Put bluntly, the music video scholar, unable to reproduce the music video directly on the page (at least to the extent that a Clara Schumann scholar can simply place her score on the page) faces the added challenge of knowing how much of the video to simply describe before they can begin to analyse. Is it enough to put in precise time indications and trust that your reader will pause their reading and click through to YouTube? If not, to what extent should a music video scholar describe the video, rather than assume that the reader has watched it?

Tiffany Naiman’s chapter ‘More solemn than a fading star: David Bowie’s Modernist aesthetics of ending’ is exemplary in this regard, describing Bowie’s 2016 swan-song ‘Blackstar’ in rich yet concise detail, analysing its intertextual connections to T.S. Eliot, Igor Stravinsky and W.B. Yeats. Bowie, who has often expressed his admiration for Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*, directly cues the association for the viewer in a sequence described virtuosically by Naiman:

> The women hold their hands at their sides, move side to side with a slight tilt to their bodies, and then raise one arm straight into the air, with fists clenched tight, directly imitating the concluding moment of the *Rite*’s first tableau … The young women momentarily rise up on their toes and then drop to the ground on all fours, begin to shake and swoop back and forth, arms extended. (p. 306)

Naiman’s description paints such a vivid picture that a reader who hasn’t seen Bowie’s video still understands the visual impact of the passage in question. Contrast this with Jem Kelly’s ‘The Palimpsestic Pop Music Video: Intermediality
and Hypermedia’. Kelly provides the following conclusion to his analysis of Björk’s 1997 video ‘Bachelorette’: ‘[d]espite the intracompositional intermediality used . . . it is apparent that the cyclical nature of love – like life – can be narrated in emotionally affective ways that are – like performance – ephemeral’ (p. 230). The author clearly intends this as a ‘zinger’, but the rhetorical flourish is lost on a reader who has not watched the video.

Ultimately, Kelly’s goal is not to describe the video, but to put the finishing touches to his argument for advancing a theory of intermediality. After reading Christofer Jost’s ‘Tying it all together: music video and transmedia practice in popular music’, I’m not sure that I see the value in distinguishing between intermediality and transmediality. Both scholars draw extensively from Rajewsky (2002), for whom a hallmark of the ‘trans-’ variety is that it isn’t necessarily possible to identify a single dominant medium (e.g. the artwork is both a video and an art installation), whereas the ‘inter-’ variety must include at least two different media types.

Question 2

What types of musical analysis are most effective at bolstering the music video scholar’s observations about a video? As a music theorist turned music video scholar, I prefer to see graphic representations of musical analysis directly on the page, not necessarily the traditional staff notation of melody and harmony. Creative graphical representations of music abound in music-analytical literature, including spatial and/or colourful representations of timbre, the use of box or other metre-based tabular notation to display rhythm and metre in hip-hop and EDM, and form charts such as those that Lori Burns employs throughout ‘Dynamic multimodality in extreme metal performance’. One such form chart (pp. 189–90) demonstrates the temporal, spatial and corporeal parameters of the song’s lyrics. This chart is in service of a three-part analytical method Burns has explored extensively elsewhere (p. 199, and see Burns 2017), in which the meanings of a music video’s words, music and images are assessed individually before being placed into dialogue with one another. The payoff for this carefully segmented analysis comes in the interpretive moves Burns takes in assessing the ‘word–music–image’ intersections. One such intersection – the link between various levels of guitar distortion and corresponding levels of visual distortion (p. 196) – is all the more powerful for having been set up patiently by an analysis of the corporeal gestures inherent in the guitar distortion (p. 190) and the temporal disruptions that result from the image distortion (p. 193).

Another scholar known for analysing simultaneously occurring visual and musical stimuli (much like one does in the analysis of opera) is Carol Vernallis, whose essay here, aptly titled ‘How to Analyze Music Videos . . .’, is likely to become the first essay on music videos an instructor assigns in their seminar. Vernallis patiently combs through Beyoncé’s ‘Pretty Hurts’, highlighting most of the interpretive moves one might make when analysing connections between audio and video, including timbres and colors (p. 258), phrase rhythm and movement (p. 259), and musical and editing rhythm (p. 260). Brilliantly written, it works as a how-to guide for both beginners and seasoned scholars alike.

There are also strong moments of musical analysis in this collection that rely entirely on prose to describe musical attributes that relate to visual stimuli, the latter of which the author reproduces using screenshots. One example comes in Jada Watson’s ‘Real-urban imagery in country music videos: identity, space, and place’,
which highlights the connections between place and narrative in a video by Alberta-based artist Corb Lund. The strength of her musical analysis comes from an astute understanding of guitar technique. Watson shows how a single gesture—‘an electric guitar played through a spring reverb ... using a vibrato arm to bend pitches downward to create ethereal reverberant tones’ (p. 285)—can signify not only wide open, rural spaces for Lund, but also nostalgia for similar guitar timbres in Chris Isaak’s 1990s soft rock classic ‘Wicked Game’, and numerous 1960s surf rock classics.

To be fair, sometimes musical analysis that does use traditional musical notation goes awry particularly for doing so. The music-analytical conclusion of ‘Justin Timberlake’s “Man of the Woods”: lumbersexuality, nature, and larking around’, by Stan Hawkins and Tore Størvold, hinges entirely on the authors analysing the song’s bridge modulation (from C to E-flat major: the passage is found at 2'27–3'00 of the video) in the wrong key (from C to A-flat major): ‘[a]lthough the more standard modulation is by a semitone or tone, Timberlake opts for a rare I–bVI [sic] key shift’ (p. 331). This is all the more surprising given that a transcription of this passage as their Example 17.2 (p. 324) is notated correctly in E-flat major. In contrast, John McGrath’s “How does a story get told from fractured bits?” Laurie Anderson’s transformative repetition could be greatly improved with traditional staff notation. His identification of certain motives recurring across disparate works is well researched, but instead of providing transcriptions to help the reader identify these motives and their transformations, McGrath instead invents names for them (e.g. ‘the grief motif’, p. 246) and tells the reader where they occur.

Finally, twice in the collection a valid musical analysis leads an author to an invalid conclusion. The harmonic analysis in Robert Strachan’s ‘Post-digital music video and genre: indie rock, nostalgia, digitization, and technological materiality’ locates indieness in the song’s I–V–ii–IV progression. However, that progression’s appearance in nearly all genres of music makes it far too generic to signify any particular genre. Likewise in Hawkins and Stervold, ‘Harmony has a major role in capturing the southern feel of the track: the chords are straightforward in a major key, predominantly centered on the tonic, subdominant, and dominant (I–IV–V in C)’ (p. 323).

**Question 3**

Does the added visual dimension of music video, relative to recorded audio, provide even more impetus for popular music scholars to address issues of race, ethnicity, ability, gender, sexuality and social justice? An internal memo from the Society for Music Theory’s Engaged Music Theory Working Group, circulated to the Publication Committee at the 2020 National Meeting, suggests that all music-theoretical scholarship (and, if music theory, then all music ... and if all music scholarship, then all scholarship?) should address the broader power dynamics inherent in our object of study:

Although we suggest that editors should create special issues related to anti-racism, anti-sexism, and decoloniality in music theory, we also wish to emphasize that ideally all music theory scholarship should confront the oppressive system of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Part five of the Handbook, entitled ‘Subjectivities and Discourses: Gender, Sexuality, Race, and Religion’, addresses these issues head on. Anna-Elena Pääkköla does a thorough job of confronting oppressive systems. Her central question in ‘Nicki Minaj’s “Anaconda”: intersectional feminist fat studies, sexuality, and embodiment’
addresses whether Minaj’s provocative 2014 video represents a state of empowerment or plays into a harmful stereotype about fat Black women as hyper-sexualised objects. Pääkkölä concludes that ‘Anaconda’ ultimately represents ‘a state of queer ecstasy where the possibility of experiencing pleasure in your own body, outside the demands of a fat-phobic and racist society, is brought to the fore: breaking expectations, laughing at stereotypes, exaggerating them to the point of ridicule, and, to top it all, celebrating who and what you are’ (p. 371). Every semester I teach this video I get some variation on the same question: aren’t sexually explicit videos like ‘Anaconda’ always still subjected to the male gaze? Pääkkölä provides a better answer than I have ever been able to: ‘whenever sexuality is performed in an explicit way, even when the actions are obviously performative and intended to afford emancipatory meetings, these intentions will always be lost on certain members of the public, whose position of privilege in varied context of reception remains unchallenged’ (p. 373). Such an analysis succeeds precisely because it identifies the queer ecstasy inherent in Minaj’s expression while identifying the oppressive systems in our society that threaten its reception as such.

Marc Lafrance’s analysis in ‘Going too far: representations of violence against men in Pink’s “Please don’t leave me”’ could be applied to any video in which women ‘take it too far’ by exacting their revenge through intimate partner violence against men. According to Lafrance, such a role reversal does more harm than good by reinforcing violent, masculine stereotypes.

Music video scholar Alyssa Woods teams up with religious studies scholar Robert Michael Edwards for a fascinating collaboration entitled ‘Gangsta crisis, catharsis, and conversion: coming to God in hip-hop video narratives’. After analysing the life and work of a number of artists (DMX, Nas, The Game) with varying degrees of allegiance to a dizzying number of religions, the duo concludes with an analysis of Kendrick Lamar’s ‘Humble’ (2017), a video filled with evocative religious imagery. The analysis is equally evocative, illustrated with plenty of lyrical quotes and five screengrabs. That the famous scene where Lamar and others’ heads are bound in burning rope is given four different interpretations – stemming from widely different religious traditions – speaks to the multivalence and ambiguity of interpretation possible in Lamar’s (or any) rich video.

I conclude by returning to the value of music video analysis as a bonafide discipline. Vernallis offers just a state-of-the-art (p. 273), arguing that popular music scholars should pay attention to music videos because they occupy a cultural centrality in today’s media landscape; their aesthetics have indelibly influenced television, games and other multimedia; and because music video as a genre creates and follows its own formal and narrative conventions. The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music Video Analysis represents a Janus-faced moment in music video research. On the one hand, it faces the past, cataloguing the diverse, ad-hoc, interdisciplinary approaches that shaped the nascent sub-field of popular music studies, while at the same time looking toward the future, codifying a toolbox of approaches that now finally represents music video research as an established discipline. As such, this collection of essays is an indispensable volume for both seasoned music video scholars and fresher voices looking to understand the state of the field.

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One may think that after years of important contributions to the field of phonomusicology (Bennett and Bates 2018), no approach to popular music analysis would discard the production side as arbitrary anymore, at least not in the form of outright ignorance. Yet just this happened at a conference on the German genre of Schlager in 2020: a musicologist presented a rather traditional take on the biggest domestic hit of recent years, Helene Fischer’s ‘Atemlos’. While authoritatively seated behind a grand piano and dissecting writer Kristina Bach’s score in a 19th century style, the presenter’s few words about the cheap production suggested that the producer’s work (that of acclaimed artist Jean Frankfurter), was little more than some clicks on a PC, only adding commercial noise to the song.

This may serve as an extreme example of what Jay Hodgson criticises. Even when the impact of sound engineers and producers on aesthetics is reckoned, seldom do researchers delve into the techniques and processes of the ‘musical practice of recording technology’ (p. 206). Even when they do, the recording studio is often exclusively understood as ‘a site for social, cultural, and industrial struggle’ (p. 206), and not as a creative tool. We may understand these closing remarks as the motivation behind the book, to get the reader to know the tools of recording practices and to understand their constituent role in popular music aesthetics. Hodgson refers to the people operating these tools as ‘recordists’, a term that Albin Zak (2001) established to ‘describe those individuals who are in some way responsible for either part or whole of the recording process’ (in Bennett 2019, p. 1).

Hodgson’s book is structured along the recording process. After explaining (electro)acoustic basics, he follows the tracking, mixing and mastering of audio signals. In every chapter, he addresses single tools like different microphone types (p. 23 and ff.), effect units (p. 141) and techniques like the ‘DI – transduction tandem’ (p. 48). In his quest to make the reader familiar with studio instruments, he relates their technical capabilities and features to actual recording practice, extensively citing personal interviewees. Adding to this are Hodgson’s own experiences. Besides academia, where he edited many books in Routledge’s Perspectives on Music Production Series, he works as a master engineer and producer. Although this study clearly focuses on standard techniques, the author stresses the need to keep in mind that – urged inter alia by the commercial and competitive setting in which record production takes place – these rules are broken constantly: in ‘recording practices [...], product far outweighs process’ (p. 39).

This fact makes it more important to train the listeners’ ears for the traces of sound production, which also include the exploitation of psychoacoustic effects like the haas-trick (p. 135). Thus, the book comes with much illustrative material: a