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Introduction to Dossier on British Music videos

Journal of British Cinema and Television

Author: Emily Caston

Dossier Title: *Hidden Screen Industries: British Music Video and Absent Bodies.*

This dossier features new research about the impact of British music videos arising from a four-year research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council: *Fifty Years of British Music Video, 1966-2016: Assessing innovation, industry, influence and impact* (AH/M003515/1). It sits alongside an earlier special issue of the journal *Music, Sound and the Moving Image* (Caston & Smith 2017) and a forthcoming monograph (Caston 2020) on the history of this industry since 1966. The objective of our project was to redress gaps in scholarship on music videos, using our unprecedented industry access. Designed as a collaboration between our universities, the British Library, the British Film Institute and Thunderbird Releasing, it sought to redress the emphasis in extant literature on the USA by examining British music videos released between 1966 and 2016, and sought to redress the methodological predominance of textual analyses by examining, instead, empirical evidence regarding their production and distribution, and the impact, influence and industry of British music videos as a commercial product and cultural form (Laing 1985).

The articles in this dossier are specifically concerned with the relevance of British music videos in the context of film and television studies. Smith examines the role of British pop music television as a driver for the initial emergence of music video genres in the 1960s. Caston surveys the horizontal integration of the music video production industry within the British screen industries as a whole. Haddon explores issues around gender and regional bias in film production through a dedicated company case study. The relationship between Britain's screen industries remains a relatively under-researched area, save for Hill and McLoone (1996) and much

scholarship has tended to reproduce the artificial disciplinary dichotomy between Film Studies and Television Studies. Music video is a fledgling subject which sits in between a number of established academic disciplines and has consequently fallen between the institutional and theoretical cracks and crevices of those disciplines. Popular music studies and cultural studies have informed the more established efforts (see for example Laing (1985), Goodwin (1992), Negus (1992), Frith (1996), Beebe and Middleton (2007)). But film and television studies have only rarely attempted to address video with Mundy's (1999) work on British musicals and Donnelly's essay on British experimental music videos (2007).

The first article in this collection, by Justin Smith, presents new evidence about the development of British music videos in the 1960s. A long-standing assumption is that music video evolved in response to the launch of MTV in the USA in 1981. But British videos developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Videos made in 1966/7 by The Who, The Kinks, The Beatles, and the Dave Clark Five were part of the first so-called 'British invasion' of the USA. They were screened on such shows as the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Drawing on records held at the BBC's Written Archives, and interviews with a number of 1960s music video directors, Smith shows how demand from *Top of the Pops* and other music shows of the era in Europe and the USA for pre-recorded inserts before the British Invasion began drove the development of new creative film techniques and genres in Britain for that first wave. TV demand for these inserts generally arose because the artists were unable to perform live in the TV studio themselves due to other commitments such as overseas tours. Smith argues that in the hands of British filmmakers such as Peter Whitehead, the 'pop promo', became a creative enterprise which exceeded television's requirement to cover for an artist's studio absence.

Smith's research is significant. It demonstrates that those videos which are almost always excluded from the history, treated as 'pre-cursors' or prehistory along with the Scopitone and Soundies, are part of the core story. It corrects the view that that music video proper emerged in the UK in the mid-1970s, a view underpinned by a popular mythology that Queen's video for

‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ (1975) was the foundational work. This originary myth has been supported by some leading scholars of popular music: Keith Negus calls it ‘the first conscious use of music video to promote a pop single’ (Negus 1992: 93). Yet, as Mundy recognized, and Smith’s article illustrates, it was developments in the visual economy of popular music in the 1960s that established the commercial aesthetic of music video. Whilst Austerlitz mentions not only The Beatles and the impact of Richard Lester’s *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964), but also The Kinks and Pink Floyd, he gives only three and a half pages to the 1966-67 period (2007: 17-21). To date no scholar has recognised the full extent to which it was in this period that a distinctively British video style arrived, born of what Frith describes as the Pop School Art School attitude. The Pop School Art attitude continued into the 1970s when, as the second article in this collection demonstrates, the first dedicated and specialist music video production companies were founded in London. By the time MTV launched in the USA in 1981, there was already a production industry here in the UK and a recognized stable of video genres for labels to draw on.

At the heart of Emily Caston’s article is the view of music video as one of a number of *hidden* screen industries that has been neglected in recent research on the British screen industries. It is fundamentally a social network and, for most of the fifty year period the AHRC project surveys, has been a geographical cluster centred in Soho, London, comprising individuals, companies, streets, pubs and clubs integrated physically and economically, if not always socially or creatively, with the film and television commercial production companies (and to a lesser extent the television production companies). It largely comprises individuals working at small independent production companies and post production companies concentrated in Soho, mostly as freelancers but some on rolling permanent contracts, along with video commissioners (some freelance, some on staff), and directors’ representative companies. *Promo News TV*, a website which began life in the 1980s as *Promo News* - a magazine imprint of *Music Week* - and, the annual UK Music Video Awards, function as formal vehicles for communications, peer recognition and commendation within the industry.

In 'The Pioneers Get Shot' Caston documents the beginnings of music video production outside the established trades union ACTT. Drawing on interviews with producers from the 1970s and 1980s, she shows the hostility of the BBC and feature film industry towards the video directors and producers. But Caston demonstrate that music video quickly became a crucial R&D sector in the screen industries as a whole for the development of new talent, particularly directors and cinematographers, and for the development of new technologies and creative activities such as telecine (subsequently known as colour grading) and offline editing. Much of the detail discussed is highly relevant to current debates about sustainability in the SME sector of film and television production, the formation of clusters in the creative industries, how to stimulate innovation, R&D and diverse talent entrants in sectors of the screen industries, and how, in general, to support new media entrants whenever and wherever they occur in creative industries.

The third article, by Mimi Haddon, deals with the next phase in music video from the late 1980s to the 1990s with a case study analysis of Warp Records, established in 1989 in Sheffield, UK. From its roots in South Yorkshire's techno music scene to its position in 2015 as an independent film and music company with global reach, Warp has been widely regarded as the foremost innovator in UK independent music. But it is less well known for its contribution to music video. The visual aesthetic of its videos, developed in the hands of directors ranging from Jarvis Cocker to Chris Cunningham, has since been lauded internationally.

Warp was an early champion of such cross-media techniques as augmented reality platforms, crowd-sourced mobile applications, interactive micro-sites, 'official' fan-video promotion campaigns and the embracing of video remixes and alternative versions. Music video has been an integral function in the cultural, economic and critical success of Warp both as a record label and a film production company. Because of its close connections with the worlds of film, advertising and the recording industry, the history of the UK music video industry is chiefly a London-based narrative. Warp has been praised as a vital counter to the dominance of the South of England in film production. Although Warp Records moved from its founding city of Sheffield

in 2001, it retains an office in Sheffield [a Warp Films department]. However, within the industry, its output and production culture has been criticised as excessively ‘masculine’.

Mimi Haddon investigates these criticisms. She examines the industrial dynamic between Warp and its artists and directors, particularly in relation to gender and power. Haddon argues that a more nuanced reading of Warp videos can perhaps be reached by looking closely at what Born calls the ‘micro-social’ level of cultural production (Born 2011: 376). Using interviews with Warp’s co-founder Steve Beckett and several women involved in early Warp music videos such as Anna and Dawn, Haddon interrogates the way gender figures in the day-to-day production of music video as cultural artefact. Looking at micro-social interactions at the level of music video production also engages with Vernallis’s observation regarding the male-dominance in music video histories (Vernallis 2013: 263). The primary study of electronic music and Warp Records itself has been limited to Rob Young’s Labels Unlimited whose focus is placed squarely on the artist and music narrative, so Haddon’s is a valuable contribution to the field.

What unites all three essays is their unprecedented access to insider accounts of the music video industry. ‘Access’ is a common problem in industry research collaborations, but because this funded project had chosen to involve the industry as partners in the research rather than as ‘subjects’ of the research, we had a high level of engagement across the four years. We engaged the sector as ‘industry intellectuals’ (Caldwell 2008). We were self-consciously not ‘objective’ academics analysing subjectively immersed natives, a tendency detectable in a number of ethnographic studies of the film and television industries (eg Hesmondhalgh [1982] 2012). To this end we created a ‘steering committee’ for the project composed not only of academics but figures from the industry who would ensure we continued to work in the interests of the community and respected the internal ethical and professional standards of the community. Our panel of industry intellectuals often went to great lengths to track down video masters, callsheets or colleagues to interview, suggest research questions, names of individuals, companies or videos of which we had not heard, and engaged enthusiastically in conversations about how to theorise

their practice in relation to existing academic paradigms. The use of interviews, often unstructured and deep, raised many methodological challenges. As Mary Douglas noted forty years ago, ‘Every sentence rests on unspoken knowledge for some of its meaning’ (1975: 173), and our interest in this research project was squarely on what Douglas describes as ‘the dark side of the moon’, what needs ‘not be put into words because it seems obvious’ (ibid, 173). This placed harsh limitations on the value of interviews. The work of Haddon, Smith and Caston was to identify and excavate the unspoken words of the interviewees. This was often challenging when circumstances prevented face-to-face interviewing and necessitated phone or skype interviews instead.

All three essays here are also united by their focus on absences and invisibilities. Caston argues that music video is one of a number of ‘hidden screen industries’ that have been overlooked and ignored within film studies amongst them commercials, fashion film and corporate films, the vast bulk of moving image works produced in Britain during the first 100 years of film. To anyone other than those who make videos, the industry itself is invisible, shrouded in a marketing mythology of the artist as author. Smith’s article deals with the absence of the physical body of the artist, arguing that music video arose initially to hide the artists’ absence, and in so doing created – intentionally or not – the greater deceit of the hidden authorship of the video. Haddon’s article deals with the absence of the female both on screen and behind the scenes in music video productions. When we engaged the assistance of the industry in tracking down callsheets and video masters we were made ever more aware of the hidden and invisible work of the ‘below the line’ craft work of editors, production designers, make-up artists, stylists and runners. The project became one of archaeological excavation.

Most of all, the three essays are united by their ambition to illuminate the significance of the Digital Outputs of our research project. All three authors discuss videos included in the Special Edition Boxset of two hundred landmark music videos released by Thunderbird in 2018. Caston curated the collection in consultation with a panel of over one hundred directors, producers, cinematographers, editors, choreographers, colourists and video commissioners. Each of the

videos selected was deemed to represent a landmark in music video history; each pioneered a new genre, film technique, post production method, distribution channel, or other landmark. Within those videos from the 1960s is a remastered version of Manfred Mann's 'The Mighty Quinn' (1968), directed by John Crome. It, too, was hidden. No-one in our panel was aware of the video until the director shared a private transfer with us in interview. It had been forgotten. The film itself was found by one of the archivists at the BFI's National Film Archive. The 35mm crumbled under examination but the 16mm was strong enough to digitise. We graded the print with the director John Crome and acclaimed music video colourist Tareq Kubaisi at his company Raised by Wolves. Other rare videos from the 1960s could not be included because prints were missing or withheld by private owners such as The Huntley Archive which refused to release the print of The Kink's 'Dead End Street' (1968) for a fee of less than £12,000.

The DVD boxset is designed to illustrate the extent to which music videos in Britain have drawn on film and television genres other than the musical or experimental artists film and video: it includes a category titled Heroes and Anti-Heroes which features a wide range of moving and provocative stories featuring such acclaimed talent as Donald Sutherland, Sofia Coppola and Rosamund Pike. A category titled 'Social Realism' includes Bernard Rose's seminal 'Red Red Wine' video for UB40 (1983) which was originally banned by the BBC. The category of 'Classic Comedy', includes Julien Temple's 'Breaking The Law' for Judas Priest (1980), Dougal Wilson's witty satire on English village life for Coldplay's 'Life in Technicolor II' (2008) and Mat Kirkby's brilliant take on the English school sports competition for Roots Manuva's 'Witness' (2001).

Mimi Haddon's article is relevant to another of our Digital Outputs. Haddon's research on Warp is connected to the existing collection of Warp audio recordings held at the British Library. During the first year of our project we worked with Warp to catalogue and archive their music video collection so that it could be donated to the British Library to sit alongside the existing sound recordings, available for further research. Four of those videos are included in the Boxset: (LFO's 'LFO' (1991) 3:59, Autechre's 'Second Bad Vilbel' 1995), Aphex Twin's

‘Windowlicker’ (1999), and ‘Donkey Rhubarb (1995)). The representations of gender included in the collection counter the stereotypes tackled by Haddon in the study of Warp – take the powerful women of Sophie Muller’s videos for Shakespear’s Sister, Sade and PJ Harvey for example, and the brilliant cross-dressing of Queen in David Mallet’s video for ‘I Want To Break Free’ (1984). These are artists in control of their image, using music video to present their own definitions of their gender identity, not those imposed upon them by others.

Together the DVD boxset and these illustrative essays provide rich and varied insights into the impact of the British pop promo on British film and television and popular music cultures. And they propose a strategic intervention that challenges the long-standing dichotomy between film and television studies in screen industries research. Finally, they make visible the hidden history of British music video.

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