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SOPHIE's 'Faceshopping' as (Anti-)Lyric Video

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Author biography

Mathias Bonde Korsgaard is Assistant Professor of Film and Media Studies at School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University, Denmark. He has published extensively on music videos and audiovisual studies. His publications on music video include the book *Music Video After MTV: Audiovisual Studies, New Media, and Popular Music* (Routledge 2017), which covers some core issues in the study of music video—including the history, analysis and audiovisual aesthetics of music video—while also specifically engaging with the digital afterlife of music video online. Furthermore, Korsgaard is also the editor in chief of the Danish online film journal *16:9* (16-9.dk) which publishes articles in both Danish and English on film, television and streaming series, documentary, music video and more, also including the publication of scholarly video-essays.

Abstract

In previous studies of music video's semiotic triumvirate of music-image-text, it is most common to focus on the first two and more or less ignore the role played by words—perhaps because lyrics only rarely strike us as the most prominent part of this totality of communicative layers in music video. However, recent years have witnessed the birth of a new music video genre that places a greater emphasis on words than is usually the case, namely the so-called lyric video, that is defined by graphically replicating the sung lyrics as text in the image. This essay traces the development and definition of this particular music video genre, providing theoretical reflections on the role played by words and lyrics in music video in general and in

lyric videos in particular. It is argued that lyric videos in fact run counter to what we normally expect of music videos. This is demonstrated through an in-depth analysis of SOPHIE's 'Faceshopping' that reads as a critique of the lyric video genre from within the genre itself. Like this video, the essay maintains that the creative clash between the three different registers of music-image-text is indeed the most fundamental aspect of music video aesthetics.

Keywords

Lyric videos, music video aesthetics, SOPHIE, 'Faceshopping', audiologovisual

Introduction

Music video lyrics have only rarely been the subject of academic attention, perhaps because lyrics hardly ever strike us as the most prominent part of the totality of communicative layers in music video. This article will try to redress this lack of attention to music video lyrics with a particular focus on the fairly recent genre of so-called 'lyric videos'—asking from whence they came, what defines them, and how they differ from traditional music videos. In my own existing work, which takes as its focus post-millennial music videos, I have understood 'lyric videos' as showing 'the lyrics to the song as the video progresses' (Korsgaard 2019), most commonly by replicating 'the lyrics of the song as text in the image' (Korsgaard 2017, 69).

By letting the lyrics take center stage, lyric videos implicitly encourage discussions about the role that lyrics play in music videos in general. I will be arguing that by placing an increased emphasis on words, lyric videos in some respects run counter to what we normally expect from music videos, since much of the poetry of music videos arises from the complex interactions between music, image and text and not from the rendering concrete of one single of these elements (the sung lyrics of the song) through its mere duplication in another

element (in the visuals as text). My analysis in this article has three stages. Firstly, I will determine some of the basic ways in which the lyrics can relate to the images, and then turn to tracing the history of aesthetic engagement with words in music video by exploring certain lyric video precursors that also engage with the graphical representation of song lyrics on screen. Even while lyric videos may be a fairly new phenomenon tied specifically to the digital transformations of music video in the period from the 2000s into the 2010s, interrogating the place of words in music video is not altogether new. Secondly, tracing the historical origins and the definition of the genre will allow me to engage with a range of theoretical reflections on the role played by lyrics in music videos in general, as well as in lyric videos specifically. By highlighting words, lyric videos indirectly remind us how little heed we usually pay to words in traditional music videos. Finally, the article will provide an in-depth analysis of SOPHIE's 'Faceshopping' (2018), a video that can be read as a meta-critique of the lyric video genre. Analyzing a self-reflexive video as a case study, one which aims its critique at the straightforward graphical duplication of song lyrics, will reveal some of the differences between lyric videos and traditional music videos. 'Faceshopping' is situated between these two options: it is not labeled as a lyric video on YouTube, and due to the strong competition from other musical and visual elements than lyrics/text in the video, perhaps some viewers might not even consider it a lyric video. Nonetheless, the video provides the entire lyrics of the song represented graphically as text on screen and thereby lives up to the definition of the genre. In this way, 'Faceshopping' contradictorily appears to be *both* a lyric video *and* an anti-lyric video, occupying a space in-between lyric videos and music video proper.

A History of Words in Music Video

One of the few studies to actually pay heed to the role of lyrics in music video confirms that lyrics have rarely been the center of attention in music video studies—chapter 7 in Carol Vernallis' *Experiencing Music Video* (2004). Here, Vernallis also offers some explanations as to why this is the case, for instance by claiming that in music video 'lyrics rarely take on a superordinate function' and 'most commonly play a subservient role' (2004, 137). This general argument that lyrics are hardly ever the most essential aspect of any given music video feels instinctively true. Indeed, in the music video's semiotic triumvirate between music-image-text it is unquestionable that extant music video scholarship generally focuses more on the first two elements than on text and lyrics.

Our engagement with music video lyrics is frequently an experience of fragmentation, of only catching a few highlighted words here and there: 'If the song's lyrics are opaque or enigmatic, the video makes us experience them through a mirror even more darkly' (139). In this context, lyric videos can be considered as an attempt to refract and restore the light. But perhaps we do not always even want to fully grasp the lyrics? Of course, this probably depends on whether you are inclined to listen to the lyrics in the first place. But in fact, it could be argued that the very openness of pop lyrics is a central part of their appeal (Murphey 1989: 185). Vernallis also claims it to be a general trait of pop lyrics that they 'typically fail fully to specify' (143) what they mean, leaving us in doubt as to 'whether the singer is singing to us, to a particular hypothetical person, or to himself' (ibid.). Music video directors allegedly also deliberately 'keep this vagueness in play' opting 'to keep the musical and verbal connotations open' (ibid.). This vagueness of pop lyrics is crucial to the pleasure they offer: they can mean one thing to me and simultaneously mean something completely different to you. This is also why it can be a disappointing or even destructive experience when the meaning of the lyrics is pinned down—whether by having the person who wrote the lyrics tell us what they were

supposed to mean or by having a music video interpret them in a rather literal way that sticks with us afterwards, even if listening to the song without the visual accompaniment.

Andrew Goodwin reinforces this belief when he writes that 'the business of illustrating songs is fraught with danger—in particular the making too literal of metaphors and tropes' (Goodwin 1993, 87). Goodwin's well-known tripartite division of how lyrical content is visualized in music videos also offers some illuminating perspectives on these issues (86-88). Firstly, the images can serve to merely *illustrate* the lyrics—occurring when the visual narrative retells the story of the song lyrics. Secondly, the images can serve to *amplify* the lyrics—introducing new elements that do not conflict with the lyrics but instead add further layers. And finally, music videos might involve a *disjuncture* between lyrics and images, either by having the two go their separate ways or alternatively by having the images directly contradict the lyrics.

In other words, in a prototypical lyric video there is nothing much more to analyze than the lyrics themselves. Consequently, those lyric videos that consist of nothing but the graphic representation of the song lyrics actually tend to short-circuit Goodwin's concepts. Such videos could perhaps be said to illustrate the lyrics, but they do so in another way than what Goodwin is suggesting—they do not retell the story of the lyrics, they simply present the lyrics to the eyes of the viewer-listener. They could perhaps also be said to amplify the lyrics, but again in a different way than Goodwin means—they promote the lyrics to a greater degree than the typical music video, but they do not actually add anything which is not already there. The final category of disjunction applies only to those lyric videos that do not opt for a simple graphical representation of the song lyrics, but either aim to somehow complicate the legibility of the lyrics, or to provide other visual and textual elements that also compete for the viewer-listener's attention. The video analyzed in this article, SOPHIE's 'Faceshopping', clearly

pursues this third option, thereby defying the genre of the lyric video and deconstructing it from within.

Such videos are arguably more complex than the simplistic traditional lyric videos, and in this way, they are also closer in kind to actual music videos where the three elements of music-image-text always have a semantic effect on each other and continually wrestle each other for a place in the spotlight. In the already referenced chapter by Vernallis, she also claims it to be a common strategy of music video directors to 'refuse to locate our attention in any one place' (Vernallis 2004, 140). At any point in any given video, any one of the three elements may take hold of our attention—or perhaps more commonly, we will latch onto the relation between the visual and the musical or that between the visual and the lyrical. However, as Vernallis also notes, there are certain music video genres that 'place greater weight on the lyrics' (155). Her example is music videos for rap music, a genre where words have always been considered of key importance. But since 2004, when her book was published, another specific music video genre that greatly emphasizes the lyrics—irrespective of which musical genre the video belongs to—has gradually taken hold, namely the lyric video.

Unsurprisingly, though, this particular music video genre has also not yet been heavily scrutinized. I know only of two exceptions: an article in French by Robin Cauche (2018) with a main focus on David Bowie's 'Where Are We Now?' (2013) and a more comprehensive study of the genre by Laura McLaren (2019) with a main focus on Katy Perry as an innovator within this particular genre. Cauche provides a reading of Bowie's video as equal parts lyric video and video installation—even though the video is not officially labeled as a lyric video, as Cauche also notes. McLaren aims at defining the codes and conventions of the genre, particularly in order to explore how the musical artists are represented through lyric videos. To this end, McLaren analyses Perry's 'Wide Awake' (2012).

While lyric videos did not truly exist before YouTube and did not become a mainstream trend until the 2010s, this does not mean that they came out of nowhere. As I have established elsewhere, many of the formal transformations music video has experienced online could be considered instances of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999; Korsgaard 2017, 41ff), meaning that these allegedly 'new' digital types of music videos have analog or electronic predecessors. This applies to a range of user-generated music videos which have pre-digital roots in the practice of vidding (see for instance Russo 2009). The same is true of the interactive music video (a music video genre also explored by Anders Aktor Liljedahl in this special issue), seeing that this type of music video also harkens back to the interactive CD-ROMs of the 1990s as well as to certain music-based video games (see Korsgaard 2013, 504n6). Lyric videos also come with an equally rich prehistory, as also attested by Cauche and McLaren. Like other digital/online music video genres, lyric videos have a pre-digital lineage, arguably even predating the birth of music video. The aesthetic aspiration to graphically represent words and song lyrics in audiovisual media is thus anything but 'new', but is in fact a form of remediation.

In her chapter on lyric videos, McLaren points to some obvious precursors to the lyric video. These include certain music videos—like Prince's 'Sign O' the Times' (1983), R.E.M.'s 'Fall on Me' (1986), Talking Heads' '(Nothing But) Flowers' (1988) and George Michael's 'Praying for Time' (1990)—which foreground visualized lyrics in their audiovisual structure. It was rare in the 1980s and 1990s for videos to feature the lyrics in this way, but it was also uncommon *not* to feature the artists in the image (we only see the artists in the Talking Heads example). Cauche links these two features, claiming that the increased focus on lyrics 'tends to efface the artist,' who will therefore be either 'absent or discrete' (Cauche 2018, my translation). As McLaren argues, by way of referencing Giulia Gabrielli (Gabrielli 2010), the main purpose of choosing this particular format is to increase the understanding and

interpretation of the lyrics. In this way, not only is the viewer-listener's attention directed towards the lyrics that can now be fully comprehended—it is also implied, simply, that the lyrics are *important* in that they address serious issues or have a critical message. The same goes for the only pre-MTV example that McLaren mentions, namely the sequence from D. A. Pennebaker's *Dont Look Back* (1965) that features Bob Dylan's 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' in its entirety. This famous sequence shows Dylan standing in a back alley with a bunch of cue cards, each of which contains some of the words to the song. In continuously letting these cards drop to the ground in time with the music, most of the song lyrics are presented to us visually as text in the image, making it a proto-lyric video. In the music of Dylan, as his Nobel Prize in literature confirms, lyrics are paramount.

However, the roots of the lyric video also lie in other media and entertainment forms. Cauche suggests another possible precursor: karaoke. While karaoke is a more recent phenomenon than Pennebaker's Dylan documentary, the roots in karaoke are important to consider because the replication of lyrics on screen serve a different purpose in this format. Cauche outlines that the visual replication of lyrics serves two different *interpretational* functions: a performative and a hermeneutic. It is the hermeneutic interpretation of lyrics that McLaren analyses: not only can we make out the words of the song, we can also interpret what their 'deeper' meaning is (McLaren 2019, 164). Conversely, the performative interpretation of the lyrics refers to their 'being made singable', as Cauche calls it (Cauche 2018, my translation¹). In other words, lyric videos potentially invite two modes of engagement with song lyrics: both reflection and action—thinking about and/or singing the lyrics.

Tracing media forms backwards, the roots of the lyric video stretch further back to the short song-film series made by the Fleischer Brothers in the 1920s and 1930s, famed for

¹ 'de faire chanter' in the original.

featuring a bouncing ball. In these short sequences, a little white ball bounces in time with the music above the song lyrics represented as subtitles. Michel Chion has addressed the Fleischer Brothers' series in his book *Words on Screen*. In a short passage, aptly titled 'Song Lyrics for Audience Participation', Chion notes how the use of bouncing balls also 'spread to popular cinemas around the world', noting also that the 'singer can address the audience, too, to invite them to join in' (Chion 2017, 54). This use of lyrics as text on screen explicitly invited the viewer-listener to sing along, and Chion's analysis suggests that the form of this series shares certain traits with music videos: the centrality of music and performance is clear but the use of direct address is also a common feature. The music video for Metronomy's 'A Thing for Me' (2008) pays homage to this technique: here, the bouncing ball gradually takes on a life of its own and enters the diegetic space of the video where the band lip-sync to the lyrics, knocking the band members on their heads in time with the lyrics. We also see the lyrics graphically represented as words on screen floating near the people or objects being hit by the bouncing ball. Thus, this video, which shares common features with lyric video, draws attention to a commonality of form between the historic and contemporary media.

As these comparisons establish, the lyric video did not emerge from nowhere, and its preoccupation with the graphical replication of song lyrics is not unique to this genre. Lyric videos also possibly remediate album liner notes. Album liner notes often featured the entire lyrics to the music found on the album and thus offered the listener the opportunity to either read or sing the lyrics when listening to the music—just like lyric videos do today. In this way, lyric videos are simply a practical solution to the common problem that is the physical dematerialization of the album cover. When music is streamed digitally, it has no physical manifestation to function as a host for the lyrics. So, the rise of lyric videos is in fact also indicative of larger changes in our music listening habits—and a clear indication of the fact that

music is now more often than not part of an audiovisual totality, being something that we commonly access through screen-based technologies (see also Railton and Watson 2011: 143). Spotify's recent partnership with Genius is also clearly indicative of this. Genius provides not only song lyrics, but also other written facts about the song and its lyrics, thereby further interpreting and contextualizing the lyrics. When listening to music on Spotify's mobile app, it has become an option on select songs to engage a function called 'Behind the Lyrics' and thereby read the lyrics and annotations from Genius while the song plays back. Perhaps you could even argue that lyric videos have thus become built directly into the design of one of the major music streaming services?

If we look at the modern history of lyric videos—the birth of actual lyric videos, that is—then it seems clear that it is something that moved from initially being a user-generated phenomenon to become an industry tool at some later point. As such, lyric videos were initially made by fans, probably on the basis of their own wish to read or sing along to the lyrics. Most early user-generated lyric videos are also very artless², probably made by use of simple PowerPoint slides replicating the lyrics against a plainly colored background—serving a practical rather than an aesthetic function. Around the beginning of the 2010s, the industry seized upon the format—likely because lyric videos had already become fairly popular and are also quite inexpensive to produce. The gamechanger in this respect was the lyric video for Cee Lo Green's 'Fuck You' (2010). While this video on one hand is certainly more sophisticated than a mere animated PowerPoint with its use of kinetic typography, on the other hand it still

² Some randomly picked examples include Audioslave's 'Like a Stone' (uploaded by 'thefunnyshadow' on 12 February 2008 with almost 15 million views at the time of writing. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zdoXgGnKdc>), Johnny Cash's cover of Nine Inch Nails' 'Hurt' (uploaded by v94j on 21 April 2008 with 21 million views at the time of writing. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ahHWR0n8M0>), and The Pixies' 'Where Is My Mind?' (uploaded by 'Leknunar' on 20 December 2009 with almost 7 million views at the time of writing. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ut52Szpd-w>). Date accessed for all links: 28 October 2019.

simply shows the lyrics and nothing more. But it became quite popular nonetheless³, and thus paved the way for many other 'official' lyric videos to follow. It also made it a common practice for a single to have two different videos: the lyric version, often released first as a temporary placeholder, and the 'official' video, a more traditional music video released sometime after the lyric version.

Lyrics in Music Videos and in Lyric Videos

These different visual realizations of the same song also change the way that we listen to the music. Obviously, the lyric version greatly emphasizes the lyrics—we listen more intently not only to Cee Lo Green's voice and the melody, but also to the words that he sings. Thereby the lyric version might make us notice something in the lyrics that we normally would not have noticed if listening to the music without any visual input. For instance, the lyric version provides an increased emphasis to the call-response figure where a female choir repeats Green's 'ain't that some shit' in the background by replicating this as part of the text seen on screen.

[ILLUSTRATION 1] [CAPTION: Cee Lo Green: 'Fuck You' (Lyric Video, 2010, dir. unknown). The fact that the text on-screen writes out the choir's similarly phrased response to Green's 'ain't that some shit?' in a parenthesis further emphasizes this particular musical element] In the 'official' video, which takes place mostly in a diner, the call-response figure is also highlighted in the images as we see an actual female choir singing this. However, this female choir is present throughout the video and just before this passage they sing some harmonies as a simple 'ah', underneath Green's lead melody. Seeing that this 'ah' is *not* present visually as text in the lyric version, the viewer-listener is less likely to

³ In the wake of its release, *The New York Times* called the lyric video for 'Fuck You' a 'viral music sensation' (Cohen 2010) and at the moment of writing the video has generated more than 30 million views on YouTube. The general popularity of song lyrics online is confirmed by the fact that—according to a *New York Magazine* article—two percent of *all* web searches are for lyrics (Wiedeman 2015).

consciously hear it there, whereas in the official video it is hard not to hear this—which simultaneously means that you are less likely to consciously grasp all the words Green sings on top of the choir in this short passage. Depending on the visual treatment, the viewer-listener may thus latch on to different aspects of the music and lyrics.

While these examples are rather straightforward, they neatly demonstrate a key point about music videos in general: change one element in the image-music-text relation and our semantic understanding of the other two elements will change accordingly. Some lyric videos are in fact designed to make us creatively 'mishear' the lyrics—by use of (almost) homophone words on screen. Homophones are words that are pronounced similarly even though they are spelled differently—like 'break/brake' or 'knight/night'. In fact, the above-mentioned bouncing ball-video by Metronomy occasionally does this—for instance rephrasing the sung words 'You've got my heart, you know' visually as the words 'you goat maya art uno'—and also further replicating this visually through four accompanying objects: a picture of a woman ('you'), a stuffed antelope ('goat'), a Mayan figurine ('maya art'), and a deck of Uno cards ('uno') **[ILLUSTRATION 2] [CAPTION: Metronomy: 'A Thing For Me' (2008, dir. Megaforce). This section from Metronomy's 'A Thing For Me' use objects and slightly misspelled words to replicate the lyric 'You've got my heart you know']**. Michel Gondry achieved something similar in his video for Jean-François Coen's 'La Tour de Pise' (1993), another lyric video precursor. In this video, the French lyrics are ingeniously recreated by use of live-action footage with the words taken mostly from billboards, neon signs, shop names, magazine headlines, and so forth. Parts of the lyrics are not accurately replicated, though: the name 'Romeo' is both presented by a sign saying 'Romeo' and later by another that says 'Romano', while 'les héros' is visualized first as 'les eros' and later as 'les super heroes'.

This deliberate misspelling of words introduces a layer of complexity to the genre of the lyric video that contradicts the stated purpose of making the lyrics legible. The mismatch between the sung and the written provokes an effect that momentarily draws our attention away from simple lyrical comprehension. 'La Tour de Pise' is admittedly only a marginal lyric video, but this is also why it is aesthetically interesting. It does not merely replicate the lyrics visually, and its engagement of the audience is strengthened in its use of live action footage. As my foregoing discussion suggests, the formal strategies of lyric video need to meet the demands of reducing visual competition and enhancing the viewers' understanding of the lyrics. But this is not always sufficient to maintain the viewers' visual engagement, which can drop in an overly simple foregrounding. Some lyrics are strong enough to stand on their own, but the incorporation of live-action footage as in 'La Tour de Pise' has become a more common formal strategy in lyric videos, allying them more closely to mainstream music video form. This also resolves the practical problem of covering wordless passages in the song.

The form of lyric videos—their central organization around lyrics—serves to remind us that, in general, lyrics are not given central stage in music video. This gives us an opportunity to think about the balance of elements in music video. As Vernallis suggests: 'Two factors—the unceasing momentum of music and image, along with the way the image directs our attention to many different features within the video—serve to fragment the lyrics' (Vernallis 2004, 144). Laurent Jullier and Julien Péquignot's French-language book on music videos also reinforces such views on lyrics and words as a challenging entity within music video. In a short subsection aptly titled "Music videos struggling with words" (2013, 114-120), the language used accentuates that words are considered problematic: words are considered a

“menace”, or as posing a “threat” or “risk” (my translation⁴) to the audiovisual bond between music and images in music video. Vernallis also offers further analysis of why lyrics often play a marginal role in music videos. The priorities of form are shaped by how audiences generally listen to lyrics: ‘some listen closely, many casually, and some not at all’ (139). While pop music may generally be vococentric—as Chion has also claimed of cinema and human listening in general (Chion 1999: 6)—in that it is structured so that we clearly hear the singing *voice*, this does not necessarily mean that pop music is also *verbocentric* (Chion 1994: 5-6)—our listening to the voice might imply simply listening for the melody, and not necessarily listening for the *words*. Some critics’ studies also seem to indicate a generally low understanding or poor memory of song lyrics—though dedicated fans are typically more invested in the lyrics (Greenfield et al 1987: 317). Another study suggests that it is, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, harder to recall song lyrics when you learn them by singing than when you learn them by simply reciting them in a non-musical fashion (Racette and Peretz 2007). This could suggest that because ‘there is more to learn in a song than in a text’ (ibid. 242), the listener’s attention is also split between musical aspects like rhythm and melody on one hand and the memorizing and semantic decoding of the words on the other. Music videos are only likely to obstruct the comprehension of song lyrics even further because we also pay attention to the images. Vernallis also suggests that these general listening practices are mirrored in the common production practices of music and music video: as for the music itself ‘music is most commonly composed first and the lyrics second’ (138), while as for the images, the directors typically ‘replicate the songwriting process, turning first to music, then to lyrics’ (138).

⁴ At one point, for instance, they describe how “words threaten to take over music and images” (2013, 115, “les mots menacent de prendre le dessus sur la musique et les images” in the original).

Therefore, it might also be necessary to inspect the accuracy of the term 'audiovisual' in relation to the lyric video. Michel Chion has proposed the term 'audiologovisual' dedicating a chapter in *Audio-Vision* to the search for an 'audiologovisual poetics' (1994: 169-184) in cinema. He has also specifically mentioned music videos when arguing for the term 'audiologovisual' in his '100 concepts pour penser et décrire le cinéma sonore', a glossary that collects and explains 100 of Chion's concepts: 'The music video, for example, typically combines not merely images and music, but images, music, and words' (Chion 2012, 40). One could of course argue that words will necessarily belong to either the audio dimension (in the case of music videos in general, where words are sung) or the visual dimension (in the case of lyric videos specifically, where words are written on screen). However, in Chion's account it is rather the case that 'language transcends the strict spheres of the visual and the auditory' (ibid.). Either way, in the case of music videos 'the situation is most often triangular and not binary' (ibid.). Not least when it comes to understanding the role played by lyrics and words in music videos, the term 'audiologovisual' certainly provides further conceptual precision, even as it is perhaps unlikely that this term will triumph over the less neck-breaking and more commonly accepted term 'audiovisual'. As the following analysis of SOPHIE's 'Faceshopping' will show, there are indeed some music videos that push words to the forefront to such an extent that they seem to implore us to focus explicitly on the lyrics even while simultaneously setting up hindrances to any simple decoding of the lyrics.

SOPHIE: 'Faceshopping'

SOPHIE's self-directed video for 'Faceshopping' was released in April 2018 as the third video from her debut album *Oil of Every Pearl's Un-Insides* (2018). As mentioned, it is not a lyric video in the conventional sense: it is not labeled as such on YouTube, and it also did not follow

the mentioned promotional cycle where an 'official' music video follows the lyric version, with the lyric version being the only video for the track. This is perhaps not all that surprising, seeing that SOPHIE in many respects is also not a typical mainstream artist. Before releasing this album, SOPHIE was known mostly as a reclusive producer for other musicians, mainly staying behind the scenes. However, with this album—and the accompanying videos—SOPHIE also became a visual presence and not just a musical one, with the first video 'It's OK to Cry' (2017) being the first instance where SOPHIE explicitly used her own voice and showed her face. Along with a range of interviews with the press and along with the other videos that followed, this video thereby also cleared up the earlier mystery surrounding the gender identity of SOPHIE, born Samuel Long, establishing her as a transgender woman.

SOPHIE is often associated with the highly influential London-based label and music collective, PC Music, even as her music is not released by PC Music. However, the music of SOPHIE does share something with the sound of other PC Music artists. Generically, her music is perhaps most commonly labeled as 'pop', but it is not 'pop music' in any regular sense. Rather, it is an exaggerated pop sound, filled with bubbly, plastic-y, synthetic, hyperkinetic sounds alongside hard-hitting beats, micro-rhythmic variations, pointy synths, and manipulated often pitch-shifted vocals. 'Faceshopping' also fits this description. The musical form of the track is pretty straightforward. After a short instrumental intro, there is a refrain which the track returns to throughout. This part is dominated by a spoken, seemingly female voice and the lyrics are always the same (starting 'My face is the front of shop'). Between the refrains we most often hear a part that is split in two: the first half features a highly distorted more 'robotic' voice, and here the lyrics are different with each reiteration (the first time they go 'Artificial bloom / Hydroponic skin' etc.); the second half again features a female-sounding voice, this time singing, but not any actual words (just 'na na na'). Little over halfway through the song,

there is yet another section that is more melodic and where the beat is no longer present (starting 'So you must be the one that I have seen in my dreams'). In the final repetitions of the refrain that follow this section, another pitch-shifted voice also enters the mix on top of the spoken lead vocal. Apart from the beginning and the beatless part of the track, it is mostly driven by aggressive rhythms accompanied by a range of digital and synthetic sounds that highlight their own textuality at the partial expense of melodic and harmonic concerns.

In itself, the music arguably does not invite to a lyric video treatment, at least to the extent that it is a song that is quite difficult to sing along with. Rhythmically, the vocals often emphasize the downbeats, and in a sense, this square rhythmicity does in fact make it somewhat easy to recite the lyrics. But the trouble is that the vocals only rarely take on a melodic character, and at the same time it is also obviously difficult for the listener to recreate the sonically distorted quality of the voices. It would appear, then, that choosing to show the lyrics as text in the video is not necessarily meant as an invitation to sing along—as a call to Cauche's 'performative interpretation'. This also logically implies that it is more likely that the choice of the lyric video genre is intended to support our 'hermeneutic interpretation' of the song, simply by highlighting the words.

Nonetheless, the video also sets up also several hindrances to this goal. First of all, the lyrics are presented one word at a time, with each new word replacing the former, and not building complete sentences as is more common in conventional lyric videos, leaving the viewer-listener with less time to process the lyrics. In fact, in the parts of the song with the robotic voice, the words are often broken down into syllables ('Ar-ti-fi-cial bloom', for instance). In these sections, the writing is also often highly stylized, making it hard to make out the letters, and in some instances the writing has even been mirrored, reversed and/or turned upside down, making it even harder to read. **[ILLUSTRATION 3] [CAPTION: SOPHIE:**

'Faceshopping' (2018, dir. SOPHIE). By breaking words down into syllables, reversing, mirroring or otherwise distorting the on-screen text, the legibility of the lyrics is challenged – here the ending of the word 'results'] In the final parts of the song, where there are now two voices at the same time, it becomes even more difficult to follow the lyrics, because the words overlap both sonically and visually. **[ILLUSTRATION 4] [CAPTION: SOPHIE: 'Faceshopping' (2018, dir. SOPHIE). The aesthetic strategies of the video make the lyrics progressively harder to read, here by placing words on top of other words on top of imagery with inverted colors]**

At the same time, the visuals of the video also complicate matters further. Many parts of the video use stroboscopic lights, making the words flash before our eyes, and other parts also alternate between regular imagery and negative imagery where all colors are inverted. In this way, the words almost never stand alone, but are placed on top of an ever-changing background. The images seen in the background also often replicate or comment upon the lyrics, but this most frequently happens at a slight temporal remove. For instance, when the voice says 'Plastic surgery', we also see these words simultaneously, but just after this we see extreme close-ups of meat and flesh. The same applies to the words 'Social dialect', which are similarly followed by distorted images showing the logos of some of the most common social media, while the words 'Positive results' are also followed by images showing the reCAPTCHA 'I'm not a robot'-authentication being clicked. **[ILLUSTRATION 5] [CAPTION: SOPHIE: 'Faceshopping' (2018, dir. SOPHIE). The video also contains text on-screen that is not present in the song lyrics—here the 'I'm not a robot'-reCAPTCHA]**

The video thus thematizes information overload while simultaneously immersing the viewer-listener into an overload of information—too much coming at us all at once. In this respect, the experience of watching the video is partially comparable to listening to music—we

can choose to follow one track or another, but we can only rarely process everything all at once. The video is surely filled to the brim with information: the music itself with all its individual elements and frequent variations; the lyrics as both sung and written; elements of text that are presented visually in the image but not in the lyrics ('I'm not a robot,' for instance); the graphical abstraction, the inversion and the breaking down of the text into single words or single syllables; images that replace each other at a break-neck pace, overlapping with the text; quick flashes of images, reminiscent of subliminal advertising, where part of the text is stylized in the color and font of the Coca Cola-logo; the flashing stroboscopic lights, etc.

All of this also means that the very *experience* of watching the video cannot be satisfactorily addressed or contained by any act of analysis. Surely, with the aid of the pause-button, the video can be broken down into its smallest parts, but this does not in any way capture the essence of what it is like to actually watch the video. Critical work on music video has acknowledged that this is in fact key to how music videos typically work—they can be hard to grasp, both experientially and analytically, precisely because of the ever-shifting interactions between music, image, and text. Elsewhere I have addressed this through the dual concept of 'visualizing music' and 'musicalizing the visual', noting that two of the most common consequences of such interactions between music and image are (1) that the image becomes polyphonous in answering to the music, and (2) that this also often entails a spatiotemporal hybridity allowing the video to engage rather freely with multiple overlapping times and spaces (Korsgaard 2017). These concepts are also applicable to 'Faceshopping', not least the aspect of being visually polyphonous: the images are almost assaultive in their multiplicity.

As such, 'Faceshopping' also reads as a possible *critique* of the lyric video. This is evident simply in the fact that we cannot actually decode and comprehend all of the lyrics by merely watching the video once. But it is also evident in the audiovisual displacements

mentioned above, where the images latch onto the lyrics at a slight delay. Another passage from Vernallis' work on lyrics in music video further illuminates this effect. She asserts that most often 'the connections among word, music and text are one-to-one—an image, a sound, and a few words that separate themselves from the rest of the video' (Vernallis, 148). She then states that where relations are one-to-one, 'they do *not* have to be temporally contiguous' (ibid.). In other words, an image can link to a lyrical or musical element that occurs earlier or later than the image itself. Finally, Vernallis argues that whenever relations are slightly offset, 'rhythmic sophistication, ambiguous meaning, and questions of cause and effect can come into play' (ibid.). Building upon Vernallis' work, my analysis of 'Faceshopping' as a case study allows me to highlight how it formally and productively diverges from the conventional purposes of the lyric video. In trying to make the lyrics readable or singable, lyric videos often operate with 'one-to-one'-relations, and by demonstratively *not* doing so, 'Faceshopping' illustrates that music videos are not meant to concretize the lyrics, but rather to make them enter into the communicative mix in unpredictable and ambiguous ways.

However, this video does not only function as a reflexive critique of the lyric video genre. In addition to the theme of information overload, the video foregrounds other issues, both musically, lyrically, and visually—or, more precisely, audiologovisually. As noted at the outset, existing critical work on lyric video suggests the artist will be either 'absent or discrete' (Cauche) or 'not always visually present, so as not to distract from the lyrics' (McLaren 2019, 163). However, SOPHIE is highly present in my case study, and this presence enables an engagement with bigger issues and questions. The video clearly addresses consumerism and advertising (in fact, the Coca Cola-writing is inscribed directly on the skin at one point) while also thematizing matters of digital identity and fluid gender constructions. Both musically and visually, the video merges the organic with the machinic thereby resonating

with Donna Haraway's famous feminist Cyborg Manifesto (Haraway 1985, 65-66). Along these lines, the 'Faceshopping'-video can be seen as an audiovisual cyborg, perfectly suited for negotiating and de- and reconstructing gender identities, offering also a possible biographical connection to SOPHIE's own life and gender identity. The imagery of the video supports such performative notions of identity, in that they most frequently show ever-malleable digital models of SOPHIE's face that constantly twist and turn, inflate and deflate, break apart and fracture, or even melt down like wax at the very end. **[ILLUSTRATION 6] [CAPTION: SOPHIE: 'Faceshopping' (2018, dir. SOPHIE). 'Faceshopping' continually subjects SOPHIE's face to endless transformations and modulations, for instance with the face being broken into slices]** Such bodily modulations and transformations are also present in the 'plastic surgery' of the lyrics as well as in the plastic surgery SOPHIE herself seems to have undergone, judging from some of her noticeably modified and exaggerated facial features.

In one sense this has no bearing on the video if considered *as a lyric video*. Indeed, the lyrics of the song *might* be said to also reflect these matters in themselves—even without the video—but in another and very important sense the video also does something else than this, mostly through its rich, complex and ambiguous form. It is impossible to reduce the meaning of the video to any singular message because its aesthetic strategies rely on chaotic fragmentation, an assault of information, and ever-shifting audiologovisual interrelations. In this way, the written word is used in a novel and transformational way in this video. The presentation of the entire lyrics visually serves to give the words greater priority and emphasis than is commonly the case in music video, but simultaneously there is too much visual and musical competition for the lyrics to ever truly gain the viewer-listener's complete attention. Coupled with the graphic stylization and fragmentation of the words themselves, the effect is one of the words being integral to the sum total of the video rather than one of them being the

main or sole focus of attention. It is, again, Chion's work on the audiovisual that proves a productive reference point: in a passage on the inventive use of subtitles in the image in Tony Scott's *Man on Fire* (2004), Chion describes the film as offering 'one of the rare examples where subtitles are made conspicuous' (Chion 2013, 86) and suggests the subtitles enter into an 'audiovisual dance'. The same could be said of 'Faceshopping': rather than becoming legible and concrete, the words are rendered conspicuous, and with their shifting relations to both sound and image, they truly engage in an 'audio(logo)visual dance'.

Conclusion

Initially, lyric videos were conceived as a solution to a practical problem: they exist in order to make the lyrics legible. But in some respects, this also means that they are very unlike most other music videos, not only because they emphasize the lyrics to a stronger degree than usual, but also because their audiologovisual relations are typically rather simplistic. In this sense, they do not exploit the potential of letting music, image and words interact in multifaceted ways as is common considered a main tenet of music video aesthetics (Chion 1994, 165-68; Williams 2003; Vernallis 2004), but rather allow us to focus almost fully on one single of these elements. In time, however, some videos seem to have established a space in-between lyric videos and music video proper, combining the plain replication of text with other visual elements. SOPHIE's 'Faceshopping' is obviously an example of this, but other lyric videos have also entered this interstitial space—at least since the already mentioned Talking Heads-video from 1988, but this trend is also present in other music videos from the televisual days before actual lyric videos, for instance in Radiohead's 'No Surprises' (1997). But at least since 2012 there has been a wide range of videos that combine the visual replication of the lyrics as text with some kind of imagery that more clearly resembles that of a traditional video—some examples

include Cassettes Won't Listen's 'Falling Apart' (2012), Lushlife's 'Magnolia' (2012), some of Katy Perry's lyric videos, Vampire Weekend's 'Ya Hey' (2013) and 'Step' (2013), Fun.'s 'One Foot' (2013), Danny Brown's 'Really Doe' (ft. Kendrick Lamar, Ab-Soul, and Earl Sweatshirt, 2014), Rustie's 'Attak' (ft. Danny Brown, 2014), the lyric version for Ariana Grande's 'Problem' (2014), Beck's 'Heaven's Ladder' (2014), the lyric version for 'Wow' (2017) and 'Dear Life' (2017), PUP's "DVP" (2016), the lyric version for Taylor Swift's 'Look What You Made Me Do' (2017), Coldplay's 'All I Can Think About Is You' (2017), Robyn's 'Honey' (2018), Death Grips' 'Death Grips Is Online' (2018), clipping.'s 'La Mala Ordina' (2019)—and even another SOPHIE-video, 'Ponyboy' (2017). In many of these examples, the visual legibility of the lyrics is directly threatened by the competition from other visual input and/or from an obscured graphic representation of the lyrics—as is also the case in 'Faceshopping'.

Even as all of these lyric videos place different emphasis on words in relation to music and image, they all perform a third function in addition to making the lyrics readable and singable—namely making them enter complexly into the audiovisual dance. Perhaps clipping.'s 'Inside Out' (2014) and the first track from Tierra Whack's *Whack World*, 'Black Nails' (2018), can even be considered lyric videos *without any written words*, the lyrics instead being summoned indirectly through the use of visual objects? Considering these many recent videos that carve out a space beyond the simplistic lyric video, it might be argued that lyric videos have generally helped push the use of words in music video in new directions. As a medium defined by constant transformation and by being on the forefront of forging new audiovisual relations, it thus also seems likely that the music videos of the future will engage with the 'logo' of the 'audiologovisual' in ways we cannot yet imagine.

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