

DISSERTATION: The History of Music Video  
By Kevin Holy

A - The 1800's: Through the Looking Glass

B – The 1910's: Méliès and the History of Early Cinema

C – The 1920's: This is the Boring Part: early Kinetoscope

D – The 1930's: The Start of Something New

E – The Run-Up to Music TV: the 1940's – 1960's

F – Music Television: the 1970's to 2010's

G – 2015+: Youtube

H – The Future: A Speculation

I – The Distant Future: A.. Death and Rebirth?

J – The End Times: What Happens Next?

## A - The 1800's: Through the Looking Glass

November 18, 1871 was the birth of music video. On this particular day of the year that was, Lewis Carroll and the brothers MacMillan published *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*<sup>1</sup>, a sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, also by Lewis Carroll (1869).

Why is *Through the Looking-Glass* the birth of music video? It was, to my knowledge, the first views of 'television' in a widely-published, popular work of art. It was a phantasmagoria of visual hallucination, and it was illustrated.

More seriously, why is *Through the Looking-Glass*, and not *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* the birth of music video. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which was famously homaged in Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers' 'Don't Come Around Here No More' (Jeff Stein, 1985), was a benchmark in literature, to be kind of accurate, but it's the premise of *Through the Looking-Glass*, and the novel's chaotic structure, that makes me think of it as music video's birth.

I'm not forgetting art history, here: Camera obscura – the technique of projecting light onto an opposing wall, usually through a hole, is the birth of cinema, in a way: and that goes back to before our Sun was born.

But it's *Through the Looking-Glass*, a slight benchmark in its own right (in literature), that created a language in art for the creation of a visual fantasy, as seen through a glass, darkly.

I won't examine the looking glass metaphor further, for obviously it kind of mirrors the creation of television.

Let's continue.

## B – The 1910's: George Méliès and the History of Early Cinema

Why on Earth has this author chosen George fucking Méliès as a benchmark in his book about the history of mv. For one, and this is a cop-out: Méliès was a rather sizable influence on many of cinema's (and music video's) famous auteurs, at least through the 1980's and 90's: Michel Gondry, Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris (whose 'Tonight Tonight' for the Smashing Pumpkins won Video of the Year at MTV), Mark Neale (U2's 'Lemon', a Muybridge homage with hints of early cinema), 'Your Woman' (Mark Adcock for White Town) and Red Hot Chili Peppers ('Soul to Squeeze', 'Aeroplane', 'Give it Away') – all have Méliès' influence on them.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.lib.umd.edu/alice150/alice-in-wonderland/early-editions/macmillan-looking-glass>

Two: Méliès' work – unlike Eadward Muybridge, Thomas Edison's photographic dalliances, and Nikola Tesla's gravity-defying electronics, were honed in the love and passion for film itself. Not only was he a pretty decent talent, his work was aimed specifically at the art of (sometimes feature) film.

Early cinema was fun, wasn't it? Sure the Golden Age is all people talk about, what with their funny mustachios and lattés abounding in abundant glory (the people not the cinema). Early cinema was experimental! It was everything fun about cinema before it became a business. Anything else?

Music video was not a thought during early cinema, but it was, on occasion, a skypoint. Meaning: A star on which one sends one's hopes and dreams. Which is often what music video can be to those daring to dream. So anyway.

#### C – The 1920's: This is the Boring Part: early Kinetoscope

Ugh. Kinetoscope. Not often associated with music video, but technically a precursor to the Scopitone machine and other 'video jukebox'es. Shit, the Kinetoscope wasn't even in use in the 1920's. It was all but finished – stay with me – by the 1920's, but its contemporaries and successors flourished in the Twenties and beyond.

We do need to pay homage to the Kinetoscope, a Louis Le Prince patent<sup>2</sup> (later used by Edison and developed by his employee William Kennedy Laurie Dickson). It had a 'peephole' used to view film clips, in essence.

#### D - The 1930's: The Start of Something New

I mention the 1930's as the "start of something new" because it was the time when film – feature film, with sound – became a headline-making scene stealer. There are many books about this era, particularly Richard B. Jewell's 2007 *The Golden Age of Cinema: Hollywood 1929 – 1945* which marks 1929 – 1945. Cinema's silent era was earlier, and not as relevant to our interest in this paper (e.g. *Birth of a Nation* was released in 1915).

That's it, that's the chapter.

#### E – The Run-Up to Music TV: the 1940's – 1960's

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://theasc.com/asc/asc-museum-kinetoscope>

This is where things start to cook, for real. 1940 to 1946 was the ‘Soundies’ era<sup>3</sup>: short films set to an artist’s musical performance – music videos, essentially. Projected by a machine called Panoram, Soundies were in bars, restaurants, clubs, you get the idea.

Once Soundies left the scene, nothing really took their place. But: television! The device was huge in the 1950’s beyond. That would give the world a look at both scripted television and late-night musical performances, as well as television news journalism.

Musical performances begat the Beatles, the Kinks, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and (eventually) Dick Clark. I’ll get to these guys (particularly the Beatles) in a little bit.

--

Scopitones! The device, among one or two others, were made for consumption in the 1960’s. Not a bad design – they succeeded in creating music videos which were usually kind of good (Scopitone clips are available online). But they were not good business, because their owners went out of business in short shrift.

--

The rest of the decade saw the continued ratcheting-up of television and late-night (and early-morning) performances by bands and musicians looking for a go at this new market.

Videos were made during this time! They were shown in segments on shows like Laugh-In and Hee Haw (and grandma’s Lawrence Welk Show). Other ‘variety’ hours. Pre-taped, edited performances. No kidding. And it was the Sixties and Seventies so there were lots of lights.

## F - Music Television: the 1970’s to 2010’s

Now: the fun part. MTV was in idea form during the mid 1970’s. Videos – as you know them – were being made at this time as well, contrary to popular belief. The first, widely acknowledged music video sold and produced and broadcasted to a wide audience was Queen’s ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ (Bruce Gowers, 1975). No, Queen was making videos before ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’<sup>4</sup> with live director Bruce Gowers among others. Everybody was making live videos, as I mentioned before, they were just then known as musical performances and often had live editing. ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ (and the Bee Gees’ ‘Stayin’ Alive’, another biggie (Bruce Gowers, 1977)) was different in that it had a concept – many of ‘em! You know them! The lights! The fx! The glam! Well, okay, the glam was part of the act, but ‘Rhapsody’ was pre-taped and people loved it. They still do!

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cinema.ucla.edu/collections/soundies>

<sup>4</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20060219050434/http://www.mvdbase.com/artist.php?last=Queen&first=>

The video industry in the UK started – was already! – taking off. This helped propel the format into homes across the planet, although this was still an early technology so a lot of people had never seen or heard of television – as, I imagine, a few still haven't.

Still, the fun had begun.

Along came Bob Pittman, who had the great idea of Music Television: a cable channel dedicated to music clips: music video. Or, at least, he was the one who could deliver it to America. Which he – and Warner Cable – did! Along with a small number of execs and on-air (plus off-air) talent, Bob (and fellow exec Les Garland) rolled into NYC with a dream of making it big and they did. Well done.

So what happened? A revolution, led by musicians, video directors, television producers, and a still-creative industry which pumped music – at first, only white artists, and mostly rock music – into homes. MTV as you know it is still evolving. Yes, they do have two (two!) cable channels dedicated to music 24/7: MTV Live (formerly Palladia), and MTV Classic (previously VH1 Classic).

A lack of profits caused the deëvolution of MTV's main channels into reality programming. They're making money, though, which is ok (in a capitalistic society).

G - 2015+: Youtube

MTV's evolution – and MTV's lack of success creating an online video net in the Nineties and 2000's – created room for tech giants Youtube (and its new owner Google) to create the world's most revolutionary (and I say that lightly) video provider.

Youtube's story is a short one, but isn't always pleasant because of its kind of unhip design. Jawed Karim, Steve Chen and Chad Hurley (formerly at PayPal) created a kind of open-air design for its video platform. It soared, and Google bought it a year after its creation (it was a 'tech boom' this era).

The platform was very bad because of its commenters, a vast number of which were abusive or worse. Not the worst place on the Internet, but not a great one.

Still, recently the site has reigned in its commenters and stream-lined the back-end (with the help of better processors, natch).

So, there's room to grow.

H – The Future: A Speculation

What does the future hold? More and more technology? I'm not sure. Innovation in the tech field has slowed in recent years and I'm surprised that many companies are still making waves. Television's second Golden Age came and went, with Netflix and Amazon Prime. So, music video will wind up in, I think, Youtube's arms, but also on your television devices and phones (while we still have those). MTV may blink out because it rather famously hasn't developed a good forward-thinking strategy to date. It's struggling.

Not really. But MTV may be on its way out, as a purveyor of 'old' things for teens and grown-ups.

#### I – The Distant Future: A.. Death and Rebirth?

What happens distantly? Heck knows, but television will leave the scene, I think, in the late 21st, early 22<sup>nd</sup> Centuries. The Internet is here to stay, as long as our government doesn't kill't.

#### J – The End Times: What Happens Next?

Once global warming kind of takes us to a level where we – and technology – can't keep up with it, we're goners, seemingly. And with that goes all of humanity, and human history as well, it would seem likely.

Can technology make a comeback once humanity leaves the scene, supposedly? It's possible! But not likely.