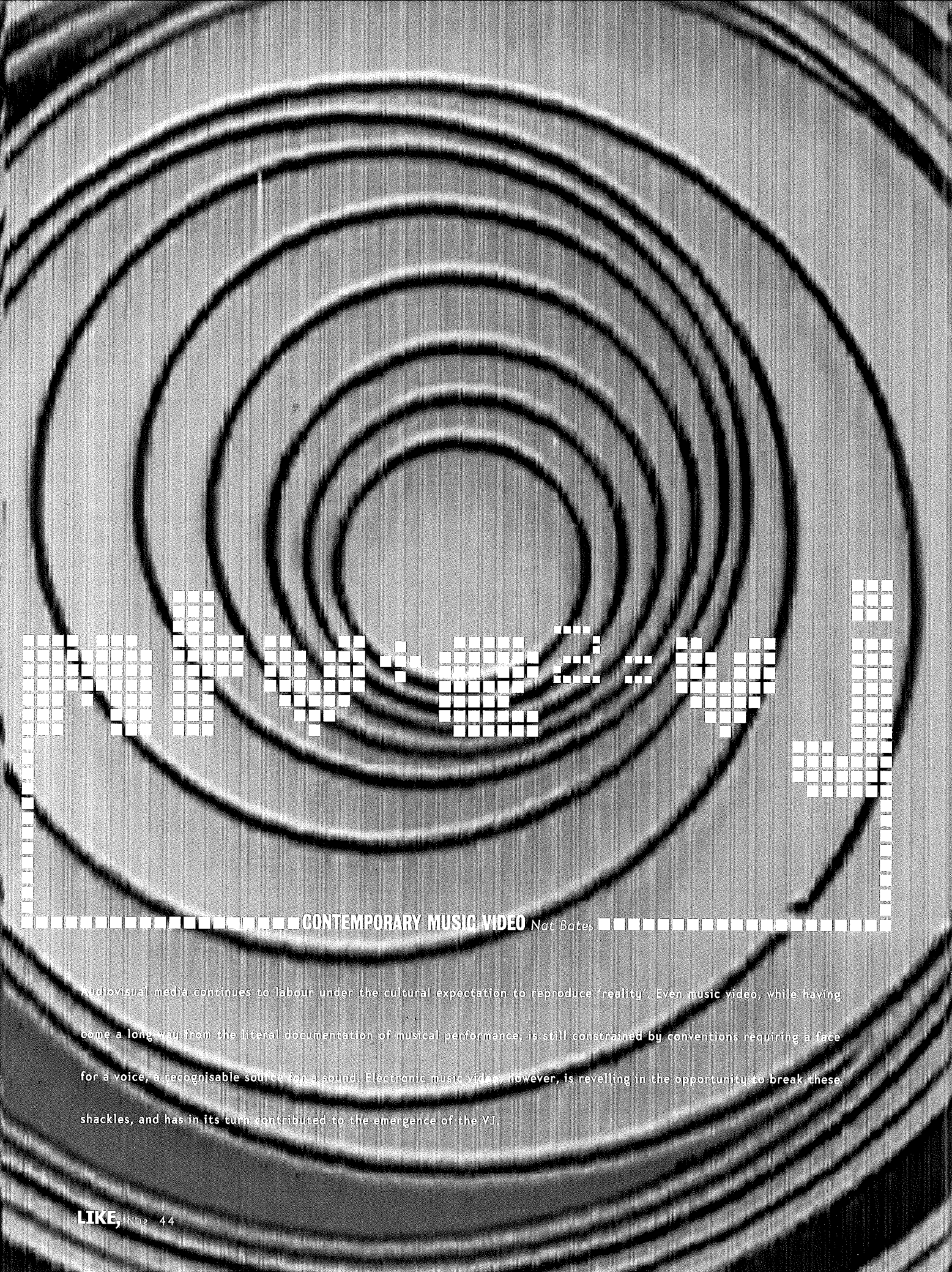


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CONTEMPORARY MUSIC VIDEO *Nat Bates*

Audiovisual media continues to labour under the cultural expectation to reproduce 'reality'. Even music video, while having come a long way from the literal documentation of musical performance, is still constrained by conventions requiring a face for a voice, a recognisable source for a sound. Electronic music video, however, is revelling in the opportunity to break these shackles, and has in its turn contributed to the emergence of the VJ.

IN THE BEGINNING there was 'musicimage'. Music – the experience of music – was always accompanied by the image of its production. One saw the singer sing, the strings stroked, the drum struck. The explanation for a sound's existence was provided by vision.

The advent of *media* changed all that—media being defined as that which has been technically mediated or relayed. Sound, first through radio and then recording, could now be separated and entirely removed from its origin. So too, imagery through the photograph and the 'moving picture'. First considered mere reproductions of reality, sound and image media quickly evolved their own autonomous identities, and now, they can be considered more powerful than the 'reality' from which they derive.

As well as separation from the point of origin, the ability to mediate caused a split between sound and image. Though experienced simultaneously they always were two entirely different things, and now they are 'captured' in different ways with the two technology streams having developed somewhat separately. The shock of the split between the visual and the aural was so great that there has been, ever since, a fierce clinging to the notion that there is a natural and inevitable bond between sound and 'moving' image. Even now, it is easy to forget (or choose to ignore) that when we wave our hand around we are actually making two recordings—image *and* sound.

Of course, music found this separation liberating and very quickly the consumption of music came to be predominantly via media—broadcast and recorded. Sound, for so long in the shadow of the all-powerful image, could stand alone. *Musique Concrète*, originating with Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry in 1950, exploited sound media to great effect. Recognisable sounds were reshaped into sound never heard before. Here was sound of known origin but sped up, slowed down, played backwards, cut short et cetera. Here was music that had no corresponding image other than bits of spliced magnetic tape feeding through a reel to reel tape machine. From here it was a short step into electronic music, sound from an unrecognisable

source. It was so alien at first that the imagery it came to be associated with was the stuff of science fiction. The most famous example being *The Forbidden Planet* (1956), the first film to have an entirely electronic score. Even when a listener can see an electronic musician performing, there is still no actual sound generating to see. No open-mouthed singer, vibrating string or resonating drum. The most one can hope for is some human interaction with the technology accompanied by a simultaneous sonic event. A finger pressing a button, a turning of a dial.

Video, perceptually and culturally, has greater separation from its origin than other reproductive visual mediums such as photography and film. The awareness of the surface in video, the flywire screen over the 'window to the world', continually reminds us that there is a camera there, with someone behind it. Perhaps if video had been invented before film then our cultural perceptions of moving images would be reversed, and we would find the video surface transparent. Maybe video would be our 'window to the world' and film would be 'an interesting effect but, you know, it has all those scratches on it!' Paradoxically, in contemporary cinema, the use of video represents 'reality', because the audience knows someone is really there filming, for example *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). The point to be made, however, is that this increased awareness of the material in video is a continuation of the process of separation from the original source.

Acknowledgment of the separation, especially in the process of audio-visual media construction, is only natural when combining images with music. Music has always been fundamentally abstract, even when composers were writing pastoral music such as Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6*. Electronic music has only logically continued the abstraction by using sounds that cannot be recognised as particular instruments, and electronic music video forges ahead with imagery that references the music in novel ways, emphasising or countering the rhythms, textures, structures, sonic and melodic relationships of the music.

This year's St. Kilda Film Festival saw the incorporation of electronic music video into its program by way of E MuVi – a competition for the best Australian electronic music video. This was inspired by MuVi – international music video from the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen (Germany) that was also showcased in the festival. The fact that there was faith enough in local production to warrant a competition open only



to the electronic music genre of music video, is indication of not only how strong the genre is, but also how much it stands apart from the mainstream. Just as electronic music can be viewed as an ideological, as well as formal, rejection of mainstream music so too can electronic music video be seen as a similar rejection

of pop and rock video conventions. Electronic music mostly avoids the inclusion of a lead singer to focus on and lyrics to sing along with. It does not adhere to the verse chorus, three and a half-minute format nor will it accept a collective label to simplify the marketing of the music (although the record companies are desperately hoping the 'electronica' label will stick). These rejections of convention may well spell commercial failure but it leaves the filmmakers with greater creative control.

Freedom from record company direction allows collaborations between musician and filmmaker to form on a more personal level, out of a genuine respect for each others work. Directors such as Englishman Chris Cunningham in his work with Aphex Twin, Björk, and Squarepusher, and locally, Scott Otto Anderson's clips for B(if)tek, Friendly, and Pole, are examples of this approach. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that an outlet for public exposure has been important to the development of this music video genre and locally this exposure is through television shows like Alchemy (SBS-TV) and Sub-Sonic (Channel 31).

However, music video is not actually video at all. Most mainstream clips are shot on film and while there are significantly more electronic music clips utilising video, the term music video cannot be used to describe the visual medium of the genre. So why have I been concerned with video as a medium at all? Because the most interesting area of contemporary 'musicimage' media reconstruction is not on the small or big screen, or at least not on the monolithic ones that sit, respectively, in the corner of the lounge room or at the end of the darkened cinema. It is in clubs, at raves and at music performance events where a new critter has been born—the VJ.

Ironically, the term VJ (video jockey) was coined by MTV and originally referred to music television presenters. In contemporary use, it refers to someone who mixes together two or more video signals in performance, as an accompaniment to live music. The-VJ's palette includes various masking, filtering, cropping and reportioning effects as well the ability to synchronise to the beat.

It is important to acknowledge the evolution of the VJ. The psychedelic light shows and computer-generated imagery shown at raves for more than a decade now – themselves descended from the oil-filled rotating slide projections shown at psychedelic rock concerts in the sixties – can be directly linked to the VJ of now. So too, to a lesser extent, can the dance clubs that have, for just as long, been using television monitors to show images thematically linked with particular music, i.e. goth rock



Left and Page 45:  
Experimental @ Centriphugal  
9 June 2000  
photo: Linda Kenmar

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Video Still: Emile Zile

such as The Cure, Bauhaus and The Sisters Of Mercy with a vampire movie such as *The Hunger*, with the sound off. The dominant force behind the development of the VJ, is the number one reason for audiences being at these venues, the music – live music. Live performance, its spatial and social dynamic – an energised musical environment – is what the VJ responds to. But VJ-ing is not a totally free-form art. The VJ germ most certainly sprung from these cultures, but also owes a debt to the current wave of electronic music video television. It remains in the tradition of music video, in that the visuals will not fracture the sound or structure of the music but compliment it. Although here, multiple screens break with the singular visual focal point of television and cinema. This diffusion of 'moving image', creates a spatial experience, in keeping with the experience of sound – it immerses, it surrounds, it places the spectator/listener in an environment. Furthermore, the surface or the material of the medium is highlighted by the fact that one can look in different directions at the same content. Look left and see a small monitor suspended high above, turn right and see a large wall projection of the same thing at eye level – and yet it is not the same. It's bigger, it's paler, it has texture provided by the surface of the wall, its matrix of dots or pixels are distinctly noticeable, and so on. In effect it is the dismantling of the notion that a televisual image has a singular identity that it retains wherever it is seen, and thus further extends the mediation—the separation from the point of origin.

Whether it is a sequenced, rehearsed act such as English group Coldcut or an improvised freeform from the likes of Melbourne group CHROMA who provide visuals for experimental sound performances and more traditional techno beat based music at Centriphugal, it is always referencing the music. Recent music and sound performance events have included performances from VJs reacting directly and spontaneously to live sound performance: everything from the Boiler Room at The Big Day Out to the Liquid Architecture Sound Festival at Lounge. Here is music and video coming together as a cohesive audio visual form, released from the pressure to reproduce or represent 'reality'.

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