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THE CONVERSATION

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The music video is a zombie – it may look dead but it's just been re-animated

October 17, 2017 10.04am BST

Taylor Swift's Look What You Made Me Do. TaylorSwift/Vevo

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Watching the rotting zombified corpse of Taylor Swift claw her way out of a grave, one could be forgiven for thinking that the music video hasn't come very far since Michael Jackson's *Thriller* in 1983. But the world in which Taylor's zombies drag their feet is totally different to the TV realm that Jackson dominated. The growth of the internet and social media has seen the power of MTV wane. But instead of curling up and dying, the music video has evolved and embraced online platforms like the undead embrace the apocalypse.

Swift's *Look What You Made Me Do* does indeed conjure up *Thriller* but it also betrays exactly how much change has taken place since John Landis turned Jackson's titular album track into an ambitious 14-minute promo, referencing both *The Return of the Living Dead* and his own *American Werewolf in London*.

Thriller notably won in three categories at the first ever MTV Video Music Awards in 1984. In 2017, the VMAs (as the awards show is commonly abbreviated) continued the recent trend of falling viewing numbers with its lowest ratings yet.

Taylor Swift - Look What You Made Me Do



Authors



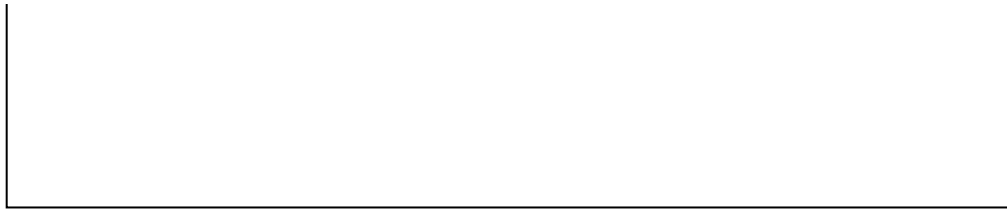
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How long MTV will maintain its commitment to the VMAs remains to be seen but the channel itself – launched in 1981 as a platform for a relatively new promotional tool – has already significantly reduced its music programming. Instead, building on the success of early docu-soaps like *The Real World* and *The Osbournes* (once offering only occasional respite from back-to-back videos interspersed with music news from its VJs), reality TV offerings have now become MTV mainstays.

The video's gone viral

By contrast the natural home for *Look What You Made Me Do* is now found online. Although rather than being downgraded by MTV's indifference, the sharing power associated with the likes of YouTube can ensure more exposure than its playlisting on cable TV ever could. As Gina Arnold discusses in *Music/Video*, viral hits such as *Gangnam Style* are indebted to the platform.

And while MTV might have introduced the early work of auteurs such as **David Fincher**, **Spike Jonze**, **Michel Gondry**, **Anton Corbijn**, **Mark Romanek**, **Chris Cunningham** and **Jonathan Glazer** to an audience, it is again YouTube (plus similar video sharing sites including Vimeo) that will offer a space for new talent pushing the boundaries of music video's audio-visual dialogue.

Michael Jackson - Thriller (Official Music Video)



The move away from the MTV playlist means that video producers no longer need to create content to meet that demand and are able to make videos directly for their fans. This has led to some weird and

wonderful oddities, catering to very specific markets with examples including the recent Arca videos and their exploration of male sexuality and male vulnerability.

Technological advancements have allowed new contributors making interesting videos that were once the preserve of big budget mavericks like Cunningham with clients such a Bjork. Now “unofficial” videos and newer stars – such as Unicorn and Philippa Price – vie for attention online while pushing the format into new territory.

Technology and changes in the industry has meant video making has become much more interesting, egalitarian and less restricted by label bosses who were previously producing content that was destined almost exclusively for MTV. Now that the music video no longer remains coupled to the financial base of major music labels, a diffuse and more complex audiovisual landscape is emerging. Artists such as FKA twigs, for example, shift from using this very visible platform for music product to participating in adverts for brands like Nike, while still presenting her music in ways that appear to confirm her authenticity as an artist.

But the music video also remains a vehicle for the presentation of commercialised celebrity culture and stereotypical ideas regarding gender and sexuality. Many women in mainstream popular music have had to address their visual representations and ultimately accept mass objectification in exchange for success. Ariana’s Grande’s playing into the age old “virgin/whore” trope in **Dangerous Woman** provides a case in point. While Robin Thicke’s controversial **Blurred Lines** is another extreme example of male objectification of women. In a welcome shift of cultural mood, the backlash against this video was so extreme, that Thicke’s career has never fully recovered.

But although sexual objectification is commonplace in music videos, more recently it may well provide the space to challenge these representations. Artists are using music video in a range of ways, as platforms to bolster their personas, comment upon celebrity culture, and air their political views. Popular female artists present their views regarding body image issues and their implied power relations through various means in their music videos. Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Rihanna and Nicki Minaj have all used various tactics to directly comment on, and often challenge, contemporary discourse surrounding body image.

FKA twigs - Pendulum



Much of what makes FKA Twig's work interesting is the varied and complex self-representations projected through her **music videos**. Her commitment to exploring how technology can be manipulated and used to manipulate the female form presents work that can be read as feminist without overtly labelling it as such. Her work speaks to the complexity of contemporary celebrity and digital cultures where her femininity and feminism are often difficult and contradictory.

It is safe to say that music video has not only survived the demise of MTV as its primary outlet, but has transformed and shifted into a more complex and diffuse form that offers a space for expression, creativity, nostalgia, political commentary as well as the presentation of commercially packaged pop – a la Taylor Swift. It is evolving alongside other visual technologies and is now situated somewhere in the messy and interesting space between art and commerce. It seems the format is not quite dead and buried after all.

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