

Faces without interiority: Music video's reinvention of the portrait

TOMÁŠ JIRSA

In point of fact, all the portrait ever does is manifest approximate allures of absence.
Jean-Luc Nancy: *The Look of the Portrait* (2000)

When Hans Belting dubbed Rainer Maria Rilke's only novel *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910; *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, 1990) a modernist farewell to the face (2017, 23), he was not alluding to the uncanny passage wherein an anonymous woman in a Parisian street abruptly tears off her own face, thus letting the narrator's horrified gaze split between a faceless head and the hollow facial skin in her hands, but to another dazzling, albeit strongly ironic fragment that stages the face discarding any sign of a personal identity.

For example, it never occurred to me before how many faces there are. There are multitudes of people, but there are many more faces, because each person has several of them. There are people who wear the same face for years; naturally it wears out, gets dirty, splits at the seams, stretches like gloves worn during a long journey. They are thrifty, uncomplicated people; they never change it, never even have it cleaned. It's good enough, they say, and who can convince them of the contrary? Of course, since they have several faces, you might wonder what they do with the other ones. They keep them in storage. Their children will wear them. But sometimes it also happens that their dogs go out wearing them. And why not? A face is a face (1990, 6).

Leaving aside the surrounding traumatic pace of the urban modernization resonating throughout Malte's narrative, this fragment is striking for its consistent inversion of the then popular physiognomic discourse, for its shift to an anti-essentialist aesthetic gesture articulating the face as a replaceable and transposable object. In other words, the privileged site of subjectivity and interiority and the proverbial pathway to the soul is replaced with a mask, a dense facial object leaving behind any metaphysical baggage, a removable form that cuts off the alleged semiotic liaison between the external and the internal, and travels freely between different subjects (human and non-human alike). Consequently, the fragment poses both a conceptual and a formal problem to the aesthetics of the face, one that I will argue has been taken up almost a century later in a different medium, obviously impossible for Rilke to even envision and yet intimately close not only to the continuous integration of the visual arts into his poetics but also to the artistic synthesis of *Gesamtkunstwerk* widespread in his period: namely, the music video.¹

No matter how contemporary music videos differ across genres, aesthetic styles, and production backgrounds, the face emerges in the majority of them as a peculiar object that can hardly be overlooked. Shot and edited in a great variety of angles, light, duration, color filters, and positions, the facial close-ups endorse a specific video atmosphere while operating in either lip-sync or out of sync mode according to a particular directorial choice. The music video might well have “killed the radio star” – as the first piece released by MTV in 1981 announced via The Buggles’ eponymous song – but the video stars themselves owe their post-media revival mainly to the foundation of the global video-sharing website YouTube in 2005, the platform that has since circulated, distributed, and promoted myriads of performers’ faces all over the world and eventually confirmed the dominant place of the face in the aesthetics of the entire genre.

Yet there is a catch with such a ubiquitous facial exhibition; the more frequently a performer’s face appears, the less it reveals about its owner, ultimately blurring the connection between the performer, the music, and the lyrics. Within the music video genre that provides a whole array of mask-faces that individual artists can pick up and discard at will, Rilke’s assertion that there are “many more faces” than people gives us an important lead as it privileges the logic of circulation and proliferation over the autonomy of an individual. This *opacity* of the face begs a couple of questions that will frame the following inquiry: What is the agency of these overexposed, multiplied, and yet de-subjectifying faces? How do they operate within the music video structure? And what are their media and aesthetic functions? Building upon recent theories of non-mimetic portrait in the visual arts (esp. Nancy 2018) and the concept of formal affect (Brinkema 2014) while also drawing on some of the leading voices of the ongoing music video turn (Vernallis 2013; Korsgaard 2017; Shaviro 2017), this essay argues that contemporary music video production replaces the face as an expression of the subject’s interiority and identity with a media-affective *interface* whose main function is to amplify the video’s work of audiovisual forms, performative mechanisms, and atmosphere.² Through a close reading of a video from the contemporary hip hop scene, Earl Sweatshirt’s *Chum* (2012) directed by Hiro Murai, I demonstrate how it uses a strategy of objectification and exteriorization to generate the face as an audiovisual screen that absorbs, intensifies, and gives rhythm to both the moving images and sounds of the music video. The main goal of this essay is to explain how a contemporary music video opens up a way to rethink the portrait as a media operation undermining the traditional notions of representation, interiority, and subjectivity in favor of unfolding its technological and affective links between sounds, moving images, and lyrics.

EXPOSING THE FACE: MORPHINGS, TEARS, INTERFACES

The meandering trajectory of the face becoming opaque is intricately connected with the golden age of music video which spans from the 1980s until around the mid-1990s, also known as the MTV era. In the final extradiegetic sequence of the legendary video *Black or White* by Michael Jackson (dir. John Landis, 1991), the facial mediality in the process of desubjectification is enabled by and reflected through

the latest technology. Jackson's plea for racial equality, spelled out via the lyrics and enacted by the multicultural dancing scenes across the globe, is further played out by means of CGI (computer-generated image) processes consisting in visually morphing one face into another. Staging a playful circulation of the faces of all kinds of ethnicity, color, age, and gender that nod to the rhythm of the song while seamlessly transitioning, the setting also offers a timely meta-commentary of the music video genre in its technological development and collaborative thrust. Back from the video's diegetic world, the action takes place within the *mise-en-abyme* space of the studio where the dominant presence of the singer is taken over by the video crew, extras, and the apparatus getting the cameras and computers in the spotlight. As a result, the overall scene covering both the digital rendering of countless visages through the computer graphics and the studio "control room" foreshadows the music video faciality that moves past any humanist claim to interiority toward the transformative operation of morphing (Fig. 1). By establishing the digital technology as a prerequisite of the visible identity in flux, the video rephrases Friedrich Kittler's famous techno-ontological dictum from 1990, "Nur was schaltbar ist, ist überhaupt" [Only what is switchable is at all] (2017, 5), into an epistemological formula posing that only what is *transformable* is at all.³



Fig. 1: John Landis: *Black or White*, 1991. Image from computerhistory.org.

While Landis' self-disclosing aesthetics parses the face as a result of computational technologies, John Maybury's video for Sinéad O'Connor's song "Nothing Compares 2U" (1990) demonstrates that the face is anything but an easily readable emotional surface and psychological index referring to the performer's inner depths. Against the backdrop of the slow-paced pop song melody and the dominant atmospheric synthesizers, the close-ups of the singer's pale face entirely fill the black frame, her eyes turning alternately right to the camera and away in the second person address whereby her shy look oscillates with her forceful singing. In the second part of the video, these close-ups are juxtaposed with the cross-fades of neoclassical statues and the long shots of the singer walking around them in the Parc de Saint-Cloud.

According to Steven Shaviro, these atmospheric shots “balance the sheer intensity of O’Connor’s face by giving us a somewhat more distanced objective correlative for the sadness expressed in her singing” (2017, 68–69). While standing for a dominant surface upon which the interaction between music, voice, moving images, and lyrics is played out, the singer’s face yields another meta-genre reflection and, indeed, a deconstruction of the music video’s fundamental facial function, the *lip-syncing*: instead of conventionally “simulating” a temporal harmony between the present moment of the singing and the now of the story unraveled through the voice, she performs the song lyrics in a depersonalized fashion as a kind of voice-over, lip-syncing the preexistent text precisely and yet distantly in the manner of a Brechtian estrangement. So even though this performance matches the key definition of the music video given by Mathias Bonde Korsgaard as “a dual synesthetic remediation between sound and image through which music is visualized and vision musicalized” (2017, 86), the face sustains this specific two-way process with a hardly negligible dose of irony.

Despite its nakedness and exposure, further scenes intensify the illegibility of the face even more, precisely when the shots of the neoclassical statues and their torsos enhance a plasticity of the human face. The exteriority of the facial object, which is constructed and *sculptured* rather than “naturally” given, is then attested by a tear which – as precisely argued by Eugenie Brinkema – does not come about as a manifestation of an emotional economy, but rather as an “affective exteriority”, voiding its relation to interiority while disclosing “a formal affectivity of shape, structure, duration, line, light” (2014, 23). It comes as no surprise, then, that when the lyrics of the song go “Nothing can stop these lonely tears from falling” the singer’s two tears come too late without any red-rimmed eyes and corresponding facial expression, insofar as the tear takes up the role of an auto-referential index whose only function is to signal that at this moment of climax a tear *should appear* (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: John Maybury: *Nothing Compares 2U*, 1990. Vimeo. Screenshot by the author.

There is a lot of weeping and tears shed in the music videos which more or less consciously allude to this audiovisual “arche-tear” – such as Janelle Monáe’s *Cold War* (dir. Wendy Morgan, 2010),⁴ FKA Twigs’ *Water Me* (dir. Jesse Kanda, 2013),

Kodaline's *Shed a Tear* (dir. James Fitzgerald, 2018), or a direct tribute to Maybury's video in Miley Cyrus' *Wrecking Ball* (dir. Terry Richardson, 2013) – but what aligns them is the overwhelming facial exposure and the peculiar distance between a shedding tear and a masterfully controlled voice.

As both examples of the experimental exploration of the facial dispositif show, the self-conscious aesthetics of the face within the music video genre effectuates various operations, dismantling a conventional assumption of a semiotic surface that reflects an inner self and emotional essence of the subject. First and foremost, the face acts as a choreographic core, both visual and sonic *membrane*, and a rhythmical center around which the music and the images revolve, take off from, and return to. Such rebounds, however, are a far cry from a narcissistic self-exposure of the performer's persona inasmuch as they do not exhibit the face as an embodiment of a unique individual. A similar point is made by Carol Vernallis; although she repeatedly claims that one of the main functions of the music video is to “showcase the star” and thus provide a kind of “foregrounded portrait” (2013, 249), she also argues that “[t]he hyperfocus on the face is complemented by today's musical arrangement, lyrics, and production” (222).⁵ The traditional idea of a self-contained image of the face thus arises as a conceptually more compelling part of the whole audiovisual network. Neither an idealist face-in-itself, nor a modernist face-for-itself, but rather the operational *face in-between*, forward, and along. Existing only due to and through the labor of the *ex-position* of the subject – which, as Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us, does not mean to reveal or reproduce but instead “to pro-duce it: to bring it forth, to draw it out” (2018, 14) – the face becomes *index*, though once again, not of a performer's ineffable interiority but of its media transformation into an audiovisual relay. What both Landis's morphing faces and Maybury's emotionally illegible facial object indicated and what the following analysis will demonstrate is that in place of representing a preestablished subjectivity, a sort of “artist on demand”, this indexical face performs a task of the *interface* that conducts both the aural and visual motion while amplifying the interpenetration of sounds, moving images, and lyrics.

A FACE THAT LOOPS: *CHUM*

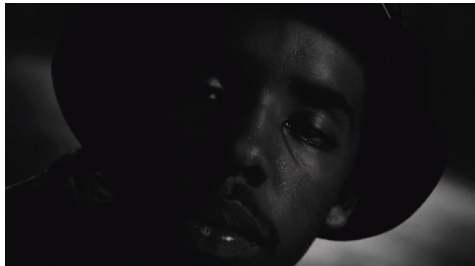
How to combine the frenetic pace of Earl Sweatshirt's rap with the existential lyrics about his missing father and dubious friends, an aimless roaming through a hostile city, and the painful plodding on the paths of languishing psyche? You put them together into a piano loop consisting of two minor chords and hectic staccato drums in the slow 4/4 tempo of 80 bpm. Only rarely does it happen that the chorus of a song is not just referentially – explicitly or symbolically – illustrated but that, instead, the rap flow penetrates and shapes the whole audiovisual movement of a video, as is the case of the black and white *Chum* directed by Hiro Murai for Sweatshirt's song from his first studio album *Doris* (2013).

From the intro onward, the video's articulation of sequence discloses its strategy of *desubjectification*, showing clearly that were there any meaningful link between the subject and its face, it arises mainly as a question of how the former should disappear behind the latter. Before encountering the rapper, who is both the narrator and key

protagonist of the entire nocturnal scene, we are surrounded by a rustle filled with the backdrop sounds of cicadas' chirping and passing cars in the distance and faced with a croaking frog in total indifference both to the spectators and the subsequent events. The darkness, the animal, and the non-human sounds thus open up and continue to inform the video's rhythm as well as the mode of its reading. Importantly, the initial dissolve brings Earl to the fore not frontally, but in a vertigo-provoking, swinging position which is fully coextensive with the chorus and the lyrics' major figure of *pendulum*.

Something sinister to it
 Pendulum swinging slow, a degenerate moving
 Through the city with criminals, stealth, welcome to enemy turf
 Harder than immigrants work, "Golf" is stitched into my shirt
 Get up off the pavement brush the dirt up off my psyche
 Psyche, psyche

Right after the chorus giving rhythm to the fast cuts on Earl's revolving face, the pivotal role of the animal is confirmed by a camera track in to a close-up of the frog's eye – and not the protagonist's one, as an anthropocentric view would expect – wherein a streetlight is reflected. The contrast of the direct light, flashy reflections, and shadow play complements another disproportion in the *mise-en-scène*: whereas the performer is always in both horizontal and vertical motion, the multiplying animals remain static and grotesquely majestic throughout the video. What reinvigorates the fading glow of the protagonist's face and the emerging blurring city lights behind it, is the continual movement during which Earl's body floats among the shopping carts that gradually carry on the street homeless fires, while recounting how his fatherless existence left him in ashes (Figs. 3–4).



Figs. 3–4: Hiro Murai: *Chum*, 2012. Vimeo. Screenshot by the author.

As if to confirm that memory is only one of many other hybrid images, certainly not a reliable testimony of the past but more a product of the present moment, the camera shortly cuts to a children's toy, the merry-go-round with rocking horses. While this hint to a personal (*qua* subjective and intimate) story is nothing but a trap for symbolical reading that always seeks some narrative causality behind the forms, the formal reading I propose avoids the lure of an emotionally charged plot and, instead, probes the countermovement between what the music video forms *show* and what they actually *do* – and the name of this both audiovisual and affective operation is *loop*. In this light, the sequence is governed much less (if at all) by narrative coor-

dinates than by the logic of affects involving and combining doubt, confusion, and grief. And since the “affects take shape in the details of specific visual forms and temporal structures” (Brinkema 2014, 37), instead of being represented and hence used to “move” the spectator, they are triggered by and further elaborate the formal work of a loop which oscillates and curves within the aural, textual, and visual repetitions.⁶

Consider, for instance, the successive shots of the performer–dog–performer–drummer–toy–and performer again, which appear at the same staccato pace as the piano tones of Eb minor and G minor chords and with the hasty cadence equal to the drum strokes. Throughout the song, we simultaneously hear and see the loop that drives the beats, pitch, melody, and rap lines while at the same time structuring the drifting *mise-en-scène*. Enacted by the textual motif of the pendulum and repetitive piano pattern, the performative operation of this loop frames the overall audiovisual composition. The swaying movement of this loop reaches its climax when the rapper is turned upside down while the rest of the scene remains on the ground. Being literally *suspended* – in both meanings of the word, hanged upside down by the director’s crew but mainly postponed and delayed – the subject is put in suspense and hence in doubt (Fig. 5). Yet every loop needs a hook to be tightened around, and in this case it is provided by the moving image that is undoubtedly the most exposed one: the face.



Fig. 5: Hiro Murai: *Chum*, 2012. Vimeo. Screenshot by the author.

In fact, there are two kinds of faces, the animal and the human, neither of them belonging exactly to whom they show. In its motionless indifference, the frog face corresponds to the expressionless mask which suddenly appears on the gloomy head of a dog. The same way the main protagonist is floating to the beats of the soundtrack, this skeleton-like mask travels throughout the video only to finally land on the back of the drummer (Figs. 6–7). Emphasizing its *replaceability* and *transposability*, the animal face ceases to stand for an animal and becomes a mask which freely switches between the subjects while being continually juxtaposed with the face of the rapper. Having therefore nothing to do with a Deleuzian-and-Guattarian “becoming-animal” (2004, 258–287), the video’s take on the face engages in a *short-circuiting* of animal through a cheap Halloween-like mask, ultimately rejecting the romantic essence of

otherness in favor of employing the animal's face as a musical element. Instead of expressing some mysterious non- or beyond-human dimension, the video's mute barking and loud croaking, emitted via the animal faces, become a sounding board of the dominant piano loop.



Figs. 6–7: Hiro Murai: *Chum*, 2012. Vimeo. Screenshot by the author.

If the animal face reifies en route to become a removable mask, the same direction toward objectification and exteriority is taken up by the human face as well. The position of Earl's head hanging upside down in the manner of a pendulum is but one in the overall sequence of facial and skeleton masks' transpositions between the dog, the drummer, and the rapper himself, implying that despite the dominance of the rapper's performing role his face becomes gradually replaceable. These shifts in the faces' positions and roles call for a reading that would be in line with such spatio-temporal transpositions. Instead of a naïve decoding of the emotional, personal, and symbolic propriety of an inner self lying behind a transparent face, the vertiginous movements of the camera and the face's role of a "loophole", constantly switching not an expression but the position and light, make the face a "moveable play of reflections and angles" (Nancy 2018, 99), revealing absolutely nothing about the subject's interiority. By no means does this desubjectification mean that the face loses its importance. Quite the contrary, its sequential ordering, frequency, and transpositions make the face, as aptly suggested by Abraham Geil, an "opaque but nevertheless readable surface[s]" (2017, 67) and transform it into an affective-media interface that enhances the video's atmosphere while amplifying the performative work of the audiovisual mise-en-scène. To read this interface is to probe its connectivity, operationality, and movement.

To make this shift from a conventional transparency to the readable opacity, the video boldly unhinges narrative ordering, as is tellingly summarized by the sign on Earl's hoody sweatshirt which likely speaks for a viewer's confusion: "What the Fuck is Really Going on?" The narrative uncertainty is further underscored by a diegetic interruption achieved by the interposed views on a nocturnal street that function more as photographic stills than some durational sequences, the only motion belonging either to the camera or to the frogs' throats. What activates these fixed murky images is nothing but the musical structure of the loop, grounded in *repetition* and (inter)facial circularity, by means of and through which the video's dark atmosphere operates. To navigate the non-narrative reading toward the formal work of affects

and audiovisual atmosphere is also very close to Murai's own reluctance toward any storyline synopsis (an omnipresent element especially inside YouTube fans' discussions), as he put it in an interview: "because to me what happens in the video isn't really the point. It's more of a tone thing, or you should just experience it in conjunction with the music" (Klinger 2012).

So there is, after all, a positive answer to the sardonic question stitched into Earl's sweatshirt: it's about the loop, and it's about the face; and these are arguably serious topics – with no less serious conceptual implications – for one short video. Without necessarily clinging to their geometric analogy, the loop resembles the facial *object* on the basis of repetition. As James A. Steintrager and Rey Chow argue in their brilliant contribution to the current sound studies, due to the capacity of the loop to repeat a sonic event, "the sound *becomes* an object for the listener" (2019, 10). Given this objectifying force of repetition – the essential principle of hip-hop sampling at that – it might be suggested that the face emerges as the audiovisual interface between the aural loop and the audience.

Far from being confined by the specific aesthetics of *Chum*, the affective and media interfaciality emerges in other collaborative videos of Sweatshirt and Murai, especially in the murky visuals of *Grief* (2015) where the previous facial opacity is inverted and turns into an extreme luminosity by means of thermographic cameras and heat lamps. Surrounded by and immersed in the wobbling basses, sluggish phrasing, and grim reverberations, Earl and his entourage appear as spectral figures whose paralyzed motion faithfully echoes the song's stifling soundscape, not just in terms of a "sonic envelope which surrounds a listener in a certain place or space" (Breitsameter 2017, 52) but also as an aural condition that has the potential to reconfigure the entire visual scene (Figs. 8–9). The performer's face is overlit to the point of blindness which, in turn, covers the surrounding obscure space. Instead of being imitated, the perspective of grief – the major affect which drives both the lyrics and the *mise-en-scène* – is performed through the activity of both musical and visual forms which themselves acquire the spatiotemporal qualities of this affect. What gives structure to the affect of grief and establishes the dominant atmosphere of disorientation is Earl's spectral face.



Figs. 8–9: Hiro Murai: *Grief*, 2015. Vimeo. Screenshot by the author .

The face thus plays an equally crucial role as in *Chum*: constituting both the affective and audiovisual center of the video, it acts as a rhythmical membrane that absorbs the song's atmosphere and amplifies it within the music video composition.

It is, however, important to note that this media-affective interfaciality could hardly achieve its operational effects without a formal technique of the *close-up* which is not only a landmark in the history of cinema but also its major strategy for it “embodies the pure fact of presentation, of manifestation, of showing, a ‘here it is’” (Doane 2003, 91).⁷ In her groundbreaking study building upon Jean Epstein, Béla Balász, and Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s notion of defacialization, Mary Ann Doane explains how the close-up dismantles the usual view on the face as the “privileged receptacle of affect” due to both its overwhelming scale and proximity and “pushes us beyond the realm of individuation, of social role, and of the exchange that underlies inter-subjectivity. This is why the face is indissociably linked with the process of effacement, a move beyond codification [...]” (95–96). The key difference lies in the fact that whereas in the film close-up, as Doane argues, the facial image becomes “an image rather than a threshold onto a world” (91), in the music video close-up a face becomes both the material and affective link to that world of which it makes a constitutive part, since the face actually exceeds its own image on the way to becoming an audiovisual medium. When the camera continually tracks in to a close-up of Earl’s face, this movement exposes that face not so much as a “sign, a text, a surface that demands to be read” (94) but rather as an interface requiring to be linked in.

UNHINGING THE SUBJECT, PERFORMING THE PORTRAIT

The semiotic loop of Rilke’s sentence “A face is a face” that underlies the present reading has, in fact, a double face. Along with the circular structure articulating its empty center – whence the temptation to a representational reading of the face as a sign of something *beyond* it, be it subjectivity, interiority, or an emotional maze – it emphasizes, to use Jacques Derrida’s term, its *supplementary* quality: a face that can be added to someone is also the one replacing someone, a face that depersonalizes. This second course is undertaken by Murai’s videos which undo the subjectivity of the face while creating the interface that does not reveal or reproduce a self underneath but, instead, connects the subject into a media-affective network. The face that shows while hiding, manifesting its present absence, is another name for the portrait.

In order to make this conceptual premise clearer, let us now take a closer look at a theorization of the portrait elaborated by Jean-Luc Nancy in his recent work dealing with this manifold genre in both classical and contemporary visual arts. Exploring the position and structure of the subject in relation to the look that constitutes the central problem of portraiture, Nancy, in his 2000 essay *Le Regard du portrait* (“The Look of the Portrait”, 2018), observes a situation of the modernist subject which is no longer “the self-evidence of an interiority held within itself by the suspension of the world,” since this subject threw off “resemblance and recollection understood in terms of humanism, intentionality, and representation” (2018, 40–41). In his more recent book *L’Autre Portrait* (2014; published in English together with the former essay in 2018) Nancy fleshes out the oft-dismissed and yet crucial etymology of the French verb *peindre*, a composite of the prefix *por-* (for) and the verb *traire* (to draw, e.g. a line). Within the regime of figuration and representation, “the prefix *por* (originally *pour*) marks an intensification: the line, the outline is applied or carried

forth and its intensity sends it in the direction of a substitution of the drawing of the thing drawn” (47). The gesture of *substitution* – a visual stroke, or a line, surrogating a singular *trait* and hence putting one trace in place of another – that activates the supplementary operation of replacing a pre-existing subject while adding a new one, is therefore an always already present condition of the genre of portraiture, no matter whether those mimetic lines that outline and construct a new figure belong to photography, cinema, fine arts, or music video. The portrait thus fundamentally and always follows the logic of supplement.⁸

Responding to the tendency within contemporary figurative art to account for the loss, absence, and disappearance of the human figure, Nancy applies a fitting notion of the “other portrait”, the function of which is no longer to reproduce a living person but instead to *evoke* its distanced and uncertain identity: “The other portrait is other than the portrait that proceeds from a presupposed identity, one whose appearance must be rendered. On the contrary, it proceeds from an identity that is hardly supposed at all, but rather is evoked in its withdrawal” (94). This founding moment of withdrawal takes us back, once again, to the genre’s etymological inflections: in its Italian designation, *il ritratto* signifies not only portraiture but also retreat, retraction, and withdrawal. Since the relationship between the portrayal and the person portrayed cannot be accounted for within the regime of identity, representation, and reproduction, what comes to the fore in the portrait is always “the other” who “withdraws in showing itself; it makes a retreat within its very expression” (49). This other is hence not a new ontological entity, but the one who dwells in the dynamic of a present absence, emerging *in absentia*, and disappearing while appearing.⁹

Applying Nancy’s notion to the audiovisual domain, it seems productive to step beyond the received ideas of a presupposed causality and unity between the performers’ faces, seen in the music videos, and their hidden interiority. What Murai’s videos propose, instead, is a *non-representational portrait* that exposes the subject less in its self-contained autonomy than in its withdrawal, in a particular retreat that underscores the subject’s mediality. Transforming a face into the media-affective interface can thus be understood as the music video’s attempt to reassert the supplementarity of the portrait into the audiovisual field.

This takes us back to the opening account of Landis’ CGI experiment that pre-echoed the digital music video as a new media “laboratory for exploring numerous new possibilities of manipulating photographic images made possible by computer” (Manovich 2001, 311). Accordingly, it is important to consider a media dispositif of music videos by which I do not mean a mere technological environment (studio, audiovisual equipment, computer hardware, and postproduction software) and online circulation which enable their final shape, but also the ontic operations that their audiovisual forms carry out. In his post-hermeneutic media theory of cultural techniques that “reveal the extent to which the human actor has always already been decentred by the technical object”, Bernhard Siegert (2015, 193) opens up a path by which the portrait can be thought less as a mere art genre transferred between images across different cultural contexts and historical periods, and more in terms of a productive concept, one that allows to shift the focus from an autonomous – portrayed – subject

to its media operations and affordances. Given that cultural techniques involve the “chains of operations that link humans, things, media and even animals” (Siegert 2013, 48), it can be argued that the music video portraiture works precisely as a cultural technique that blurs the boundaries between the performer’s face and its environment while transforming a face into the audiovisual interface.

Surviving in the current audiovisual forms while being continually reinvented by them, this music video trajectory of the portrait composes the face without interiority. It does so through the act of desubjectification that ties together Murai’s aesthetics of the facial exteriorization, Nancy’s moment of withdrawal, and Siegert’s operative chains. This supplementary operation of exposing the subject while removing it allows a rethinking of the portrait as a media operation undermining traditional notions of representation and identity in favor of unfolding its technological and affective links between sounds, moving images, and lyrics. To understand Rilke’s gesture of separating the face from an inner self, a gesture that finds its extension in the music video’s portraiture, one only needs to take seriously its formal work and movement through which the subject is not revealed but performed and linked. For what is performed in music videos is not merely the individual subject or artist persona but their links to the entire media ensemble that produces them.

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NOTES

- ¹ For an illuminating account of Rilke’s intermedia poetics, see Dürr (2006, 36–50).
- ² I am using the term atmosphere in line with the recent theoretical unpacking of the concept by Jan Slaby. In his Heideggerian and Hermann Schmitz-inspired view “atmospheres are manifest as tangible, forceful, qualitative ‘presences’ in experiential space” and constitute “a type of *affordance*: prepared occasions for affective engagement, for absorption and attunement” (2020, 274–275).
- ³ Although I am well aware of the serious problems of the race and identity politics underlying not only Jackson’s video but also the history of the music video in general, I decided to bracket them in my analyses, proposing that the two pieces in question actually *undo* the identitarian logic of race. By shifting the focus from the racialized face as a sign of identity to the media problem of its opacity and connectivity, both Landis’ and Maybury’s videos pose the color as a means of performativity, not an object of representation. An insightful overview of the issues of race, gender, and identity in the recent music video is provided by Railton and Watson (2011, esp. 87–107).
- ⁴ For a brilliant analysis of this video, see Shaviro (2017, 67–75).
- ⁵ Accordingly, Julie Lobalzo Wright notes that “the face and body become sites where performance is conveyed” (2017, 70). It would be worth its own study to consider the grotesque, cunningly weird, the notions of subject and identity deconstructing, and both race- and gender-bender usage of the per-

former's face in Aphex Twin's videos made by Chris Cunningham, *Windowlicker* (1999) and *Come to Daddy* (1997).

- ⁶ For a recent assessment of cultural affect theory and the concept of affective triggers, see van Alphen and Jirsa (2019, 1–14).
- ⁷ On the particular rhetoric of the music video close-up, see Vernallis (2004, 47–49).
- ⁸ Taking Nancy's etymological reflection one step further, it would not be difficult to see how the supplementary logic of portraiture absorbs another Derridean term, the one of "differance". As the *OED* reminds us, the word portrait comes from the Latin *pro-trahere*, meaning to draw forward, to reveal, to extend, to prolong, *to defer*.
- ⁹ Nancy's account makes an organic part of a broader scholarly tendency to refuse the face as a guarantee of identity and to understand the portrait as a generative work of the subject's transformation, absence, and disappearing. See esp. van Alphen (2005, 21–47); Weiss (2013); Belting (2011, 9–36; 2017, 91–105).

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Faces without interiority: Music video's reinvention of the portrait

Face. Portrait. Opacity. Media-affective interface. Hiro Murai. Earl Sweatshirt.

No matter how contemporary music videos differ across genres, aesthetic styles, and production background, they usually focus on the performer's face. Exploring its opacity and agency, this essay argues that contemporary music video production replaces the face as an expression of the subject's interiority and identity with a media-affective interface whose main function is to amplify the video's work of audiovisual forms, performative mechanisms, and atmosphere. Through a close reading of the hip-hop video *Chum* by Earl Sweatshirt (dir. Hiro Murai, 2012), I demonstrate how it generates the face as an audiovisual screen that absorbs, intensifies, and gives rhythm to both the moving images and sounds. Such desubjectification opens a way to rethink portraiture within the music video genre as a media operation undermining the traditional notions of representation, interiority, and identity in favor of unfolding its technological and affective links between sounds, moving images, and lyrics.

Tomáš Jirsa, Ph.D.
 Faculty of Arts
 Palacký University Olomouc
 Křížkovského 10
 771 80 Olomouc
 Czech Republic
 tomas.jirsa@upol.cz