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# The Unnatural and Impossible Storyworlds of Michel Gondry's Music Videos: The *Mise en Abyme* of "Bachelorette"

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

An earlier version of this essay was presented at the "Watching Music: Music Video Cultures" conference organised by CEMTI (University of Paris-8)/Maison des Sciences de l'Homme Paris Nord, and held at the Paris Philharmonic on December 2-3 2016.

- 1 COMMENTING ON THE PROCESS OF CREATIVE WRITING, Raymond Queneau argued that “the inspiration that consists in blind obedience to every impulse is in reality a sort of slavery. The classical playwright who writes his tragedy observing a certain number of familiar rules is freer than the poet who writes that which comes into his head and who is the slave of other rules of which he is ignorant” (quoted in McNulty, 2014: 5). Rather than think of creativity as a purely intuitive process based on blind obedience to impulse, Queneau instead conceived it as a



controlled process that follows conventions and rules, which can be measured in terms of formal-rhetorical-narrative structures and their transformation. Michel Gondry is one of the most innovative directors working within the music video and filmmaking creative industries. His productivity and success (especially in the 1990s) is due in part to his ability to structure the visual and aural worlds of music videos and films using a fixed set of conventions, or formal constraints. The creative and innovative nature of his work emerges from his ability to select unusual conventions, to employ them systematically (to see them through to their logical conclusion), and to combine them in inventive ways to create unnatural and impossible storyworlds that demand repeated viewing and close analysis.

- 2 This essay analyzes some of the key (especially rhetorical and narratological) conventions Gondry employs in his music videos, before focusing on the complexity of his 1997 music video of Björk's song “Bachelorette”. The analysis follows the logic of Gondry's music video as it gradually builds up a storyworld structured around unnatural and impossible events, which are manifest on screen via the rhetorical figures of simultaneity, repetition, magnification, reduction, duplication, a loop, and embedded narration, many of which are combined in the master trope of *mise en abyme*, a recursive form of embedded duplication that opens up a non-linear space in a text, an encased world that repeats the storyworld on a smaller scale. In principle (but not in this video), this embedded duplication can go on indefinitely (as with mirrors reflected in mirrors), leading to a storyworld that continually returns to its starting point to repeat itself. Similarly, Gondry's music video for Kylie Minogue's song “Come into My World” (2002) suggests a potentially infinite duplication, although in the form of superimposed temporal loops rather than *mise en abyme*. While acknowledging that many music videos employ these rhetorical figures, this essay stresses that Gondry's music videos employ a *specific combination* of rhetorical and narrative conventions to create sophisticated, internally complex, unnatural and/or impossible storyworlds.

## Unnatural Storyworlds

- 3 Storyworld is a more expansive concept than what the classical narratologists called “the narrative”. David Herman defines storyworld as a mental representation of the abstract global situation or domain “evoked implicitly as well as explicitly by a

narrative” (2009: 72). That is, the concept of storyworld not only designates the manifest story elements, but also acknowledges the virtual, non-manifest or potential dimensions of a story, dimensions that nonetheless contribute to the meaning of a film, novel, or music video. Storyworld therefore transcends the boundary of a single manifest narrative text. The inclusion of the concept of storyworld into narratology considerably expands our understanding of what a narrative is. Simply analyzing narrative into its component parts and delineating their rules of combination (the activity of classical narratology) is a reductive activity that ignores a number of a story's emergent qualities. Narratives create worlds, not just a structured sequence of events.

- 4 A key quality of storyworlds is that they are textual creations. Marie Laure-Ryan's “principle of minimal departure” states that the starting point or default stance towards storyworlds is to comprehend them in the same way as the real world until instructed otherwise (1991: 51). Until instructed otherwise: this phrase is fundamental, for storyworlds do not need to conform to the actual world and to literary realism in all its forms (naturalism, mimeticism, verisimilitude). In “Impossible Storyworlds – and What to Do with Them”, Jan Alber argued that:

Many narratives confront us with bizarre storyworlds which are governed by principles that have very little to do with the real world around us. [...] many narrative texts teem with unnatural (i.e., physically or logically impossible) scenarios that take us to the limits of human cognition. (2009: 79)

- 5 Alber distinguishes between the unnatural storyworld (physically impossible events that are “impossible by the known laws governing the physical world”) and the more radical category of the logically impossible storyworld, while other narratologists such as Brian Richardson develop a broader definition of the unnatural storyworld:

An unnatural narrative is one that contains significant antimimetic events, characters, settings, or frames. By *antimimetic*, I mean representations that contravene the presuppositions of nonfictional narratives, violate mimetic conventions and the practices of realism, and defy the conventions of existing, established genres. (2015: 3)

- 6 In this essay I use “unnatural storyworld” in Richardson's broad definition, reserving “impossible storyworld” to cover both of Alber's categories (physical and logical impossibilities).
- 7 For Richardson, the key term in defining an unnatural narrative is implausibility (involving incongruous/absurd activities) rather than impossibility. Despite these different definitions, what is common to the concept of the unnatural/impossible storyworld is its radical departure from the genre conventions of realism, mimesis and verisimilitude. This common trait reveals the distinctive nature of the storyworlds, their separation from the conventions of genres of realism, and their structuring according to a different logic and rhetoric. One way artists make an unnatural or impossible storyworld acceptable to an audience is to structure it consistently according to its own inner logic and rhetoric, for an inconsistent logic will make the storyworld appear arbitrary and meaningless, from which the audience will cognitively disengage.
- 8 Within theories of the storyworld, an auteur can be defined as an artist who creates recognizable storyworlds that span their entire oeuvre. This is this case with Michel Gondry's films and music videos.

## “Deadweight”

- 9 In his “Deadweight” (1997) music video, promoting Beck’s song of the same name and Danny Boyle’s film *A Life Less Ordinary* (1997), Michel Gondry systematically employed the rhetorical figures of antithesis and similarity to create an unnatural-absurdist and at times impossible storyworld, in which the logic of actions and events are reversed, displaced, and incongruously matched. For example, Beck’s shadow walks along the street while Beck is dragged along the ground following him; Beck watches a motorist carrying his car along the road; Beck’s office desk is on the beach, and his deck chair is in his office; wallpaper appears in picture frames, and family photos cover the entire wall. In addition, actions in Beck’s video are matched with similar actions in Danny Boyle’s film. There is nothing arbitrary about this music video: it is consistent in the way it systematically employs reversal, displacement, and incongruity to structure an unnatural storyworld. (See Buckland 2015 for a more detailed account of these reversals and matching of actions in “Deadweight”.)
- 10 In terms of storyworld logic, most of the reversals can be carried out: for example, Beck’s desk is actually on the beach, and wallpaper is placed in picture frames. This means that, for the most part, the storyworld of “Deadweight” is not an impossibility but is unnatural – that is, implausible (incongruous and absurd). Only on a few occasions does Gondry use filmic techniques such as reversal and superimposition to create a logically impossible storyworld – when Beck’s feet sink into the office carpet, as if it were water (a special effect created in post-production), or when Beck seems to follow his shoes. (For the latter special effect, Beck was filmed walking backwards with the shoes tied to his feet, but then the video was played backwards, giving the impression that Beck is walking forward, following his shoes – a very simple but effective use of filmic technique to create an impossible storyworld.)
- 11 The music video’s unnatural and impossible storyworld that Gondry created illustrates in part the song title – deadweight, which is used in English to refer to an inert person, someone who is a burden, who does not “pull their own weight”. For the most part, Beck is not a deadweight, for we see him working, even on the beach, although we soon realize this is reversed when he goes to his office. But he is dragged along the ground by his shadow (at the moment he sings the line “the music drags”), thereby looking like a deadweight, being pulled along. But the term deadweight applies mainly to Robert Lewis, the Ewan McGregor character in *A Life Less Ordinary*.

## “Come into My World”

- 12 Michel Gondry’s later music video “Come into My World” (2002), of Kylie Minogue’s song, creates an impossible storyworld consistently structured around duplication, superimposition, and a recursive loop structure. In one continuous shot, the camera follows Kylie Minogue as she walks around the intersection of the Rue du Point du Jour and the Rue de Solférino in Paris, returning to the starting point after one chorus of the song is complete. This action is repeated three more times as the motion control camera (whose movement is precisely controlled by computer) follows the exact same path. The recursive loop is the simple repetition of an action, but in this video the repetition leads to duplication and superimposition: when Kylie Minogue returns to her starting point, she meets herself from the previous iteration. Yet, this previous Kylie

Minogue is not located in the present time, but in her own past time. With each iteration, Kylie Minogue is duplicated and superimposed on the previous iteration (as are other people in the shot), which adds another level of temporality to the image. The action suggests a potentially infinite loop and therefore infinite duplication. It is an impossible storyworld because of the duplication of people and events and the multiple temporalities superimposed over one another in the same space.

- 13 The storyworld that Gondry has created around Kylie Minogue's song combines the linear syntagmatic structure of narrative and the cyclical or circular structure of myth. Jurij Lotman argued that all storytelling is in fact a combination of linearity and circularity. Lévi-Strauss privileged the nonlinear (paradigmatic) structure of myth because its storytelling structure is circular: myths move in a spiral fashion, constantly returning to and repeating with variation the same themes and scenarios in an attempt to resolve contradictions (Lévi-Strauss 1972: 229). He developed a paradigmatic method of analysis to reveal a myth's paradigmatic-circular structure. In contrast, narrative theorists focus on syntagmatic structure, which is causal and linear, for it consists of the organization of historically contingent (rather than cyclical mythological) events. Lotman argued that myth and syntagmatic narrative structures are historically related: the repetitive structure of myth is transformed into the linear causal structure of modern storytelling, with its focus on incidental actions and events:

The destruction of the cyclical-temporal mechanism of texts, (or, at least, the sharp decrease of the sphere of its functioning) led to the mass translation of mythological texts into the language of discrete-linear systems (verbal re-tellings of myth-rituals and myth-mysteries should be considered as translations of this kind) and to the creation of those novelistic pseudo-myths which first come to mind at the mention of mythology. (1979: 164)

- 14 Lotman argued that contemporary storytelling embodies both types of structure, in varying degrees: "The modern plot-text is the fruit of the interaction and reciprocal influence of these two typologically age-old types of text" (1979: 163).
- 15 What is specific about the "Come into My World" video is that it *foregrounds* both the cyclical and linear structures, a foregrounding that leads to impossibilities (duplication and superimposition of people and actions). We could try to give a psychological explanation of the structure of this music video, by saying that it retains the memory trace of past events and mixes them with current events; or we could use Einstein's space-time physics and argue that there is no temporal linearity, for all events, past and future, exist simultaneously in a four-dimensional block of space time (although the video does retain traces of linear progression). In the end, it is important to recognize that the songs are based on linearity (they follow a story) and circularity (that is, repetition of the chorus), and that the structure of the visuals follows in a literal manner the structure of the song.

## "Let Forever Be"

- 16 The technique of duplication and the technique of transformation dominate Gondry's music video of the Chemical Brothers' song "Let Forever Be" (1999). The main female protagonist in the video is duplicated on the discursive level by optical special effects: the image of her is multiplied by a kaleidoscopic effect, a fairly routine and mundane technique employed on TV in the 1970s. But, Gondry takes this effect further: the

purely visual duplication of the woman on the level of the image is transformed into a referential duplication, as multiple women, all looking the same, suddenly and magically occupy the same space, leading to the creation of an impossible storyworld. (Gondry also reverses this process, in which several identical women merge into one.) Such transformations do not only affect the main character: objects such as a clock also go through a series of transformations: it is multiplied, it is substituted (for a drum kit on two occasions) and it is enlarged.

- 17 These, then, are just some of the key techniques Michel Gondry employs in a consistent and systematic manner to create unnatural and impossible storyworlds in his music videos. I shall now turn to one example and study it in more detail.

## “Bachelorette”

- 18 In the 1990s Gondry collaborated with Björk on several music videos, including a trilogy consisting of “Human Behaviour” (1993), “Isobel” (1995), and “Bachelorette” (1997). Björk defined the link between them:

There’s an epic continuity between ‘Human Behaviour’, ‘Isobel’ and ‘Bachelorette’. [...] It’s basically a character I invented called Isobel.

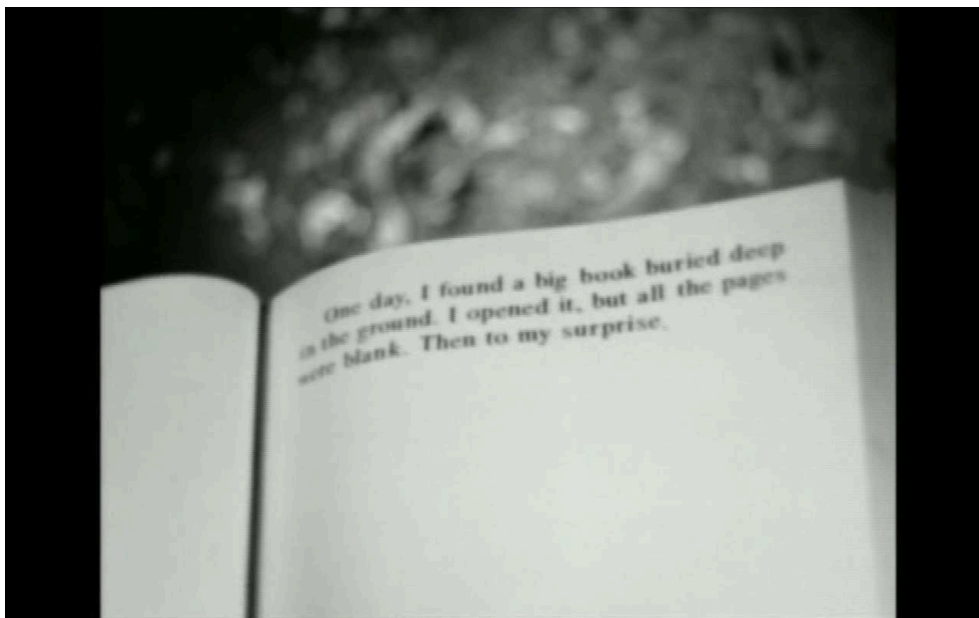
In ‘Human Behaviour’, she’s a little girl. In ‘Isobel’, she moves to the big city and big lights. She functions with her intuition which isn’t very good in cities and crashes with a lot of ill-behaved people. So she goes back and trains a lot of moths and sends them back, as messengers of intuition, into the city to people who are not working with their intuition. In ‘Bachelorette’ she takes over and trees grow over the city. It’s part autobiography part storytelling. (Björk 2016)

- 19 All three songs (and accompanying videos) begin in a natural setting, an idyllic space disturbed by the encroachment of culture. In “Human Behaviour,” Isobel is living alone in a small shack in the middle of the forest (a setting repeated at the beginning of “Bachelorette”). A hunter disrupts this peaceful setting, but is attacked by a bear. “Isobel” also begins with images of nature (trees, water, sunlight), but elements of culture incongruously intrude (small model planes, light bulbs), an event repeated in the beginning of “Bachelorette,” when Isobel digs up a book in the forest.
- 20 Gondry’s “Bachelorette” (1997) music video is the most visually elaborate of the trilogy. It employs the complex structure of *mise en abyme* to create another unnatural and impossible storyworld. The song and video have a clear linear story progression: we see Björk/Isobel in a forest, where she digs up a magical book that writes itself. The book describes Björk’s activities and her life story; it also gives her instructions, which she follows. She goes to the city to have the book published; she develops a relationship with the publisher Victor, who helps to turn it into a stage musical; but then the relationship collapses, and Björk returns to the forest. This linear story is combined with a nonlinear circular structure akin to what Lévi-Strauss identified as the spiral movement of myth. Gondry described this structure in an interview:
- What I find out more and more is that my videos, they’re very visual but there’s always a narrative. Even if the narration is not necessarily like a story, there’s always a shape. For example, in this video I did for Björk called ‘Bachelorette’, it’s a spiral. It’s a reality, then there’s a reproduction of the reality, then a reproduction of the reproduction, etc. (Gondry, quoted in Hebron, 2007)
- 21 My main focus in the following analysis is the nonlinear spiral structure of “Bachelorette” and Gondry’s use of simultaneity.



- 22 We can identify five levels of reality in this music video:
1. Everyday life
  2. Representation of everyday life in the book
  3. Stage show 1
  4. Stage show 2
  5. Stage show 3
- 23 We need a variety of rhetorical and unnatural narrative conventions to analyze these different levels.
- 24 The video begins conventionally with an unnatural but not impossible story event: Björk in the forest digging up a book. Her first person voiceover narrates in the past tense: "One day I found a big book buried deep in the ground. I opened it, but all the pages were blank. Then, to my surprise, it started writing itself: 'One day, I found a big book buried deep in the ground...'" The image track consists of a series of black and white images (some of them still) depicting the event described in the voiceover. But, when the book is opened, the video shifts from an unnatural to an impossible story event: some of the words Björk is speaking magically fill the blank page (see Figure 1). At this moment, Gondry deploys three additional tropes: simultaneity, repetition, and embedded narrative. The voiceover, the events, and the writing become simultaneous: we see Björk finding and opening the book; Björk's voiceover narrates the finding and opening of the book; and we see in the book writing appearing on the page, which recounts the events just seen and narrated. The repetition of the opening line (about finding a big book) is crucial: the first time the voiceover utters it, the line simply recounts a past event which we also see on screen; the second time the voiceover utters it, the line is being read out from the book, which represents in writing an event seen moments before. The line is therefore an embedded representation. In a moment of extreme simultaneity, we also read on screen what we see on screen – we read that the book writes itself at the precise moment we see the book writing itself.

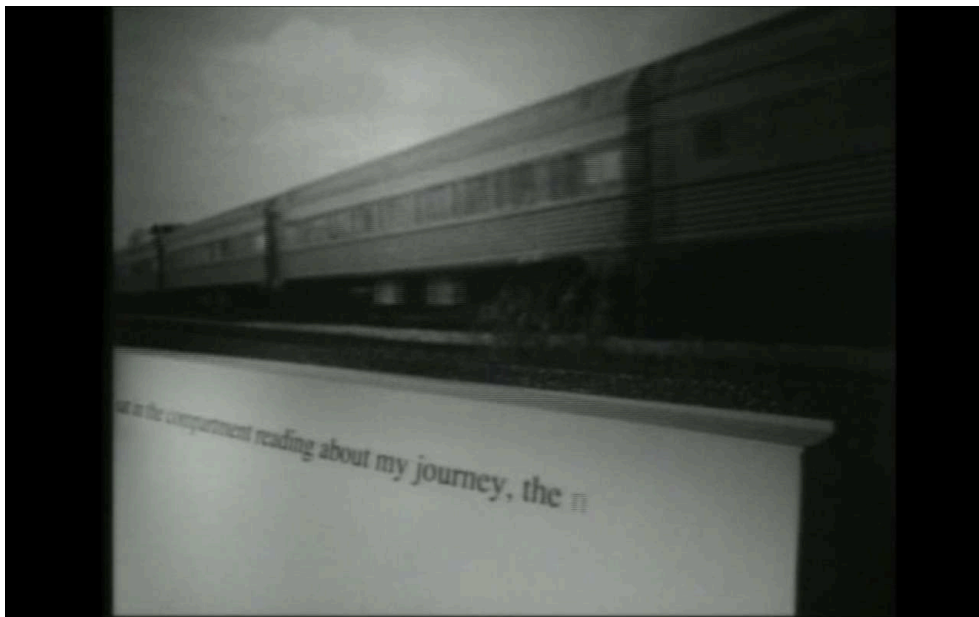
Figure 1





- 25 Moments later, the voiceover disappears and the music begins. But the simultaneity of the events and their representation in the book continue. For example, the moment we see Björk traveling to the city on the train reading the book, the line about Björk traveling to the city reading the book is shown being written in the book. This is another extreme form of simultaneity, for in the same shot we see the train in the background moving from screen left to screen right, and in the foreground we see a sentence writing itself – a sentence that describes the train journey taking place at the top of the screen (the words fill the page from left to right as the train moves from screen left to screen right). In other words, the sentence imitates the movement of the train it is describing, and the writing and the event it is describing take place simultaneously (see Figure 2). Furthermore, this shot is a split screen image, for the book we see in the foreground is the book Björk is reading on the train shown in the background; the book is on the train and the image of the book writing itself is from Björk's point of view.

Figure 2



- 26 Fifty-five seconds into the music video there is another moment of simultaneity: as the last page writes itself, it narrates what is happening at that precise moment in time (Björk is sitting in an office while the publisher Victor reads the book). For the most part, levels 1 and 2 take place at the same time. However, the book and the events are not always simultaneous. The book also dictates what Björk should do next (it instructs her to go to the city to get the book published). The book is also adapted into a stage show, which is shown on screen in colour (level 3). In the stage show we see Björk's actions (finding the book, going to the city, meeting the publisher) repeated in a highly stylized manner, using the visual rhetoric of 1930s Hollywood musicals – cutaway sets, crowd scenes etc.
- 27 As the stage show reaches the moment in the story when the book became a stage show, the stage show becomes part of the stage show, duplicating itself (level 4) – although in an abbreviated and more stylized manner (set details are scaled back and the book becomes larger). The story of Björk finding the book, going to the city, getting

the book published, and meeting the publisher is then repeated. When the show within a show reaches the moment the book is staged, we cut to a third show, as the story begins again (level 5) (see Figure 3). Gondry structures these colour musical sequences using rhetorical figures of simultaneity, repetition, magnification, reduction, duplication, and a loop, which are combined into the narrative techniques of *mise en abyme* and embedding, which generate the impression of receding into the space of the text. But on its third iteration, nature begins to encroach upon the proceedings and the words in the book disappear: the reassertion of nature leads to the demise of language's ability to represent. At his point in the stage show, Gondry introduces a new rhetorical figure – morphing, or the impossible transformation of members of the audience into trees (see Figure 4).

Figure 3



Figure 4



- 28 What happens to the linear narrative? It becomes stuck or frozen when the circular loop/spiral and embedded narrative take over. The audience in the theatre watching Björk's story unfold see it duplicated over and over. Similarly, Björk is stuck on stage, continually enacting the same events: it seems that the logic of the video's story is driven by a compulsion to repeat Björk's transformative event of finding the book and traveling to the city. It is only when the audience members turn into trees that the embedded structure is broken, releasing Björk from the circular loop she was trapped in, enabling the linear narrative to continue to its conclusion.

## Simultaneity and complex storyworlds

- 29 Gondry's deployment of simultaneity between the book being written and the events being written about significantly contributes to the video's complex storyworld. We can explore this simultaneity further via Jean-François Lyotard's book chapter on the abstract painter Barnett Newman (Lyotard 1991: 78-88). Lyotard identifies different "sites of time" in a painting: the time of production (sender), the time of reception (receiver), and the time to which the work refers (referent) (1991: 78). The subject matter of "Bachelorette" is one particular site of time: the time of the production of a book. But the site of time of the book's production is equivalent to the site of time of the events depicted in the book: we simultaneously see the events unfold and the production of the book that narrates their unfolding.
- 30 Occasionally the consumption of the book occurs at the same time as well, creating three simultaneities. We have already seen that, when Björk opens the book for the first time and starts reading, it begins writing itself, and the subject matter, the referent, is Björk finding and opening the book: production-consumption-referent times are equivalent, for there is no delay between event, its representation in writing, and its consumption. But for the most part, the time of consumption is different from the events and from the production of the book. In traditional representation, of

course, all three sites of time are separate. But in “Bachelorette”, the sender and the events (and occasionally the receiver) occupy the same site of time.

- 31 “Bachelorette” shares with many other Gondry videos the duplication of events and people (except Björk, who is not duplicated – compare with Kylie Minogue, who is duplicated). The book is duplicated (in the ordinary sense that it is mass produced), but the stage version also undergoes a transformation (it is magnified). And the book creates incongruity in the storyworld, because it is a cultural object that is dug up as if it were a natural object, and the book quickly makes the storyworld an impossible one because it begins to write itself. The storyworld also changes from black and white to colour, the first time is when the first stage show takes place (level 3) and the story begins to repeat and duplicate itself in a stylized manner. Occasionally during the colour sequences we cut back to everyday life in black and white (level 1) as Björk’s relation to the publisher Victor breaks up. The video ends with Björk back in the countryside where she began, but this time filmed in colour.
- 32 Michel Gondry’s internally complex, unnatural and impossible storyworlds are consistently and systematically structured according to the following techniques: recursive loops, rhetorical figures such as antithesis and similarity, a series of transformations, including reversal, displacement, duplication/repetition, magnification/reduction, substitution, superimposition, and narrative elements such as embedding and *mise en abyme*. It is possible to identify these and additional techniques in his other music videos (and also, less compactly, in his feature films): magnification of the diamond in “Army of Me” (1995); magnification of David Grohl’s hand and a telephone in “Everlong” (1997); the duplication of the drums and guitar amps in The White Stripes’ “The Hardest Button to Button” (2003) – in which the amps are drums are compulsively duplicated on every beat of the drum and guitar.
- 33 Gondry typically combines several of these techniques in each music video, sometimes in each scene. His authorship cannot be reduced to a single technique (for these techniques already exist in other videos and films); instead, it is to be located in a specific combination of techniques that create distinctive and recognizable storyworlds.

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"Let Forever Be" (1999, 2003), *The Work of Director Michel Gondry*, DVD, New York, Directors Label.

## ABSTRACTS

The first half of this essay identifies key rhetorical and narratological conventions video artist Michel Gondry employs to create unnatural and impossible storyworlds in three of his most iconic music videos: "Come into My World" (2002), "Deadweight" (1997), and "Let Forever Be" (1999). The key conventions identified include: antithesis, similarity, reversal, displacement, duplication/ repetition, magnification/ reduction, substitution, superimposition, embedding, and *mise en abyme*. The second half of this essay focuses on Gondry's creation of a complex storyworld in his 1997 music video of Björk's song "Bachelorette."

La première moitié de l'article dégage les principaux procédés rhétoriques et narratologiques utilisés par le vidéaste Michel Gondry dans trois de ses clips les plus emblématiques (« Come into My World » [2002], « Deadweight » [1997] et « Let Forever Be » [1999]) afin de créer des *storyworlds* non naturels et impossibles. Ces procédés comprennent l'antithèse, la similarité, l'inversion, le déplacement, la duplication/répétition, l'agrandissement/réduction, la substitution, la superposition, l'enchâssement et la mise en abyme. Dans la deuxième moitié, nous étudions la création par Gondry d'un *storyworld* complexe dans « Bachelorette », réalisé pour Björk en 1997.

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**Chronological index:** 1990-1999, 2000-2009

**Subjects:** pop music

**nomsmotscles** Björk, Gondry (Michel), Minogue (Kylie)

**Keywords:** representation (visual), videos (music) / clips, creation / creativity, cinema, aesthetics, form / structure

**Mots-clés:** représentation (visuelle), création / créativité, cinéma, esthétique, clips vidéo, forme / structure

**Geographical index:** Europe

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Warren BUCKLAND est professeur en études cinématographiques à l'université d'Oxford Brookes. Il a récemment publié *Film Theory: Rational Reconstructions* (Routledge, 2012), *Hollywood Puzzle Films* (Routledge, 2014) et, en collaboration avec Edward Branigan, *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Film Theory* (Routledge, 2014). Il vient de finir avec Daniel Fairfax l'édition d'une anthologie d'entretiens donnés par Christian Metz (*Conversations with Christian Metz: Selected Interviews on Film Theory*, Amsterdam University Press, 2017).