The visual album as transmedia project: the music video and the transmedia experience in popular music[1]

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ABSTRACT

The most-watched audiovisual genre on YouTube, the music video, is a special place for interconnecting content in the context of transmedia multimedia strategies, thus adopting various formats with the aim of yielding to industrial production (by multiplying and extending them) and users' creativity. As a recently established type of media, the visual album allows performers and bands to create open concepts, loose narratives – paraphonographies, metanarratives and *storyworlds*, as they will be described – around their musical or artistic ideas.

Rooted in the tradition of criticism and rebellion of 1970s rock, which devised formulas such as the concept album, the visual album uses the objectives and content presentation structure of transmedia communication in the media constructs designed to transmit the performer's messages in order to plan the imaginary world they present to audiences. The format must also allow varying degrees of participation by viewers, consumers and fans. *The works Lemonade* (2016, Beyoncé), *Dirty Computer* (2018, Janelle Monáe) and *El Mal Querer* (2018, Rosalía) are examples of this new audiovisual format produced by the music industry.

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The context of the music video's transformation in the music industry

Like any sector, the music industry needs mechanisms for publicizing its products, which in this case are recordings in the form of songs or albums. In the new era of the single, in which a significant part of the commercial life of an album depends on strategically releasing hit songs, the preferred means of circulation is as music videos on the viewing platform recognized as the most important in contemporary culture: YouTube. The music video fulfils almost all the conditions of an advertising narrative format listed by Isidro Moreno (2003, p. 97): short duration, fleeting permanence, multiple human and material media, shared authorship that is also subsumed in favour of the advertiser, brand over authorial stylemes, multiple constrictions, conscious subordination to fashions, submission to the audience, persuasive purpose, predominance of seduction over information and applied discourse, and being extraordinarily elliptical. There can be little doubt as to its commercial nature.

As a cultural industry, however, it also constructs values and seeks to create a narrative revolving around the performer, the star-text – a generic differentiating concept that blends fiction, narrative and identity (Goodwin, 1992). The music video fits neatly within the dominant concept of shows and merchandising in contemporary society. Music videos convey messages and values that go beyond literal content and lead to the creation of symbolic meaning, along with elements such as the album cover, concert staging, interviews, etc., in a continuous feedback loop over careers which span decades. Other factors also define the star-text, such as those specific to musical genres and everything around their staging: rap, rock, heavy metal, and all the fundamental musical genres choose basic staging and tend to consolidate it through different "texts" to present it to their fans.

There should already be many studies on how the conditions for the production and reception of promotional music texts such as the music video have changed since the move from television to the Internet, as it is rooted in a wide range of contexts of contemporary culture transformation. Albeit not systematic, Vernallis (2013) has conducted the broadest comparative analysis of music videos from the eighties and today in an attempt to compare the music video during its first decade and the present in its intermedia context. She describes changes in features such as colour, materiality and musical microrhythms, filming and editing, the narrative and structure of the video, the type of performance, intertextuality and the possibilities offered by remediated material.

Korsgaard (2012) also accepts that the music video has transformed. Peverini (2010) agrees that today the video aesthetic is a more open debate than ever, and that "implies not only technological innovation and the digital landscape but also deeper dynamics, where the performer's body collides with the viewer's / reader's gaze"[2] (Peverini, 2010, p. 150). As

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2   Lluny de voler donar una gran justificació a aquesta decisió metodològica, ens adscrivim a allò que Michael Bull, el principal estudiós de la música mediada tecnològicament, ha estat fent en els seus treballs que tracten el tema: entrevistes i una anàlisi qualitativa d'aquestes.

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mentioned, being inserted into the logic of the web in this way marked the beginning of a post-television period for the music video (Sedeño-Valdellós, Rodríguez-López, & Roger-Acuña, 2016).

With the arrival of new links between media came new contexts for interaction between content and reception modes. In the case of music, this broader reception enabled a more intense relationship with the performer and for content to be generated linking participation at different moments of the live performance or on social networks (interaction with fans, publishing parodic texts, etc.).

Fans' ability to gain specialized technical knowledge, adapt technologies and use them to re-edit audiovisual productions or to promote communities has facilitated this collaborative social production around the music video format. Fan videos, UMVs (user music videos), AMVs (anime music videos), ship vids, lyric videos, mashups and memes form a long list of spin-offs, which intensify the relationship with the performer or group. They are a way of participating in the performance (understood in an overarching sense) and become a way of appropriating and mediating the extraordinary live event. Sharing content on social networks can also provide social recognition, and it can be commented on and re-edited by other users. As a final step, having ascertained that the music video is currently without a doubt the most effective format for product placement, some performers are adding other elements to this alchemy by merging the mobile phone, content creation and advertising for other products.

Transmedia communication

However, the processes through which the music video transforms and inserts itself into the wider logic do not end there. Transmedia strategies are a growing area for research and creation in the field of contemporary communication. Their purpose is to serve emerging innovative cultural projects, which are specifically designed and construct a multi-platform narrative world that is continuously expanding or with the potential to be developed using different media. This enables a uniquely constructed context to be established by using formulas to generate engagement and by creatively layering content to seduce the viewer and draw them towards a unique cultural, communicative or artistic idea. In general, it is about projecting storyworlds, whose logic is more than just the sum of different media or their multiplication, and is "the result of converting a discretionary restricted access mediation system into a potentially universal continuous access system" (Carrera, Limón, Herrero, & Sáinz de Baranda, 2013, p. 544).

In general, transmedia has one main piece of content or macrohistory comprising the overall narrative (which is always immense due to its scope) and independent messages (in the form of its chapters, stories or units), which are connected through different media. The transmedia project consists of planning this process in an ordered way distrib-

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uted over time, and it is developed via expanded context, which is perhaps secondary. This content is not found at the heart of the story; it is secondary and is either produced by the project creators themselves or is UGC (user-generated content) created via video platforms, video games, social networks, etc., which at the same time becomes part of the dialogue and contributes to the construction of the complete story.

In other words, a transmedia project is institutionalized as one that engineers these formulas relating to the interrelationship between story and content in the medium and long term. In this context of transmedia globality and continuing a tradition of answering a "visual lack", which according to Simon Frith (1988) characterizes popular music, the visual album can be seen as an intermedial cultural artefact and transmedia strategy: a relatively new way of mediating a performer's persona and how they are staged/their media life.

The visual album: definition and transmedia context

The visual album has been configuring itself as an iconic alternative way for performers to present themselves alongside their music for several years, but its roots go back as far as the conceptual rock album. With a legacy from video and television, it emerged in parallel with video art practices, action art, the happening, and avant-garde art, and is made up of music videos without a plan or structured storyline as found in the classic narrative model. The visual compositions are associative in nature as descriptive music videos, which fall between the conceptual and the performative: "they rest on a poetic form, a metaphor above all. They do not tell a story in a linear way, what they do is create a certain abstract or surrealist atmosphere or aesthetic. It may be a sequence of images with a common concept in colours or forms which, shaped by the music, form a semiotic tableaux that expresses the feeling of the music, not necessarily the lyrics of the song" (Sedeño-Valdellós, 2007).

There are many examples of this. *Sgt Pepper´s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) and *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972) are two legendary works of major significance in the modern musical imagination that contributed to the mythicization of the performers: The Beatles and David Bowie. The film for Pink Floyd's *The Wall* (1979) became a benchmark of rock iconography, an iconic work of contemporary visual resistance. The specificity of *Year Zero* (2011), by Nine Inch Nails, lies in its activist approach to denouncing the antidemocratic drift in North American politics during the previous decade, characterized by post-truth and the manipulation facilitated by big data techniques being applied to social networks. In the case of *Mylo Xyloto*, the concept is inspired by the colour and shapes of graffiti art to develop a comic based on the songs and encompassed in the music video format: a specific way to broaden the storytelling together with the artwork and other graphic elements on the album (Shute, 2013; Burns, 2016).

Harrison provides an express definition of the visual album: "a visual album is an audio-

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visual product that has a direct relationship with the music from a corresponding audio album by the same performer(s). Its album length is more than the standard music video length of 3-5 minutes, and strong visual and textual relations are present to form continuity throughout the whole album" (Harrison, 2014, pp. 16–17). There are different types of visual album. Sometimes a structure of specific videos is created of each song (for individual consumption/distribution on social networks, due to their short lifespan) and in other cases a more extensive audiovisual discourse is put together as a film. These options include different hybrid formats, as has been discussed with the examples *Let England shake* (PJ Harvey, 2011), *ODDSAC* (Animal Collective, 2010) and *Valtari Mystery film Experiment* (Sigur Ros, 2012) (Sedeño-Valdellós, 2016).

Nevertheless, to move towards identifying the key contribution made by the visual album it is necessary to address the characterization of the type of narrative and whether a specific type of relationship that generates a closed meaning from the multi-modal relationship between videos (and other texts) and songs (and their lyrics) can be identified. Serge Lacasse (2000) transfers Genette's concept of *paratext* (1997) to the production of popular music, coining the term *paraphonography* as a combination of materials that mediate the musical narrative, including graphics, texts, the album cover artwork, comics and graphic novels, as well as concerts, performances and their advertising images (Burns, 2016).

This idea allows us to move away from the linear teleological concept of narrative towards one that is looser and with a broader objective, and to move towards a connection with creating situations, which all together creates a type of *storyworld*:

> Storyworlds are global mental representations enabling interpreters to frame inferences about the situations, characters, and occurrences either explicitly mentioned in or implied by a narrative text or discourse. As such, storyworlds are mental models of the situations and events being recounted – of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what manner. Reciprocally, narrative artifacts (texts, films, etc.) provide blueprints for the creation and modification of such mentally configured storyworlds. (Herman, 2009, pp. 106–107)

Viñuela, stressing a lack of definition constructed from a series of motives and formulas, which diachronically connects music videos during a performer's career and, synchronically, those belonging to an entire album with a visual discourse, speaks of metanarrative as a "discourse that strengthens the performer's identity and in consequence secures their links with the fanbase" (Viñuela, 2019, p. 77).

A tension that shifts between unity and variety, "the visual album creates continuity through the use of visual leitmotifs, which allude to earlier fictional and personal narratives" (Harrison, 2014, p. 3). The mechanisms that unify the different videos that make up the visual album may be repetitive motifs (themes, iconography, staging, location, types of charac-

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ters, etc.) such as leitmotivs, which "do not refer to a classic cause-and-effect narrative but to another narrativity similar to how painting creates scenes 'impregnated with time', as *tableaux vivants*" (Sedeño-Valdellós, 2016, p. 118). The director chooses similar structures, visual resources, photographic colorimetry and textures, as well as visual effects (VFX), although this continuity must be balanced with innovative elements that stand out: "the logic of these strategies lies in the intertextuality, but always seeking to reinforce the guiding narrative structure… The performer moves in the tension between innovating in each new creation… to not defraud their followers and even gain them new audiences" (Viñuela, 2019, pp. 78–79).

Ultimately, the visual album is a change in emphasis from the narrative to the visual, with stories constructed using fragments of scenes, characters, anecdotes or visual gags and visually uncomplicated scenes in which musicians or groups craft their relationship with the viewer openly and in the long term.

The visual album and its variants

Whether paraphonography, storyworld or metanarrative, there are already active examples of the possibilities and capabilities of the visual album realized in transmedial projects.

The performer Beyoncé has released two visual albums: *Beyoncé* (2013) and *Lemonade* (2016). The second, with a more intentional media strategy, uses specific storytelling "based on each woman's journey towards self-knowledge and healing" (Dubboff, 2016). There is an activist element in the choice of a narrative with references to African American history and feminism in the chapter titles (*Intuition, Denial, Anger, Apathy, Emptiness, Accountability, Reformation, Forgiveness, Resurrection, Hope and Redemption*) and the choice of social networks and platforms on which the videos were released, individually or as films. *Lemonade* owes much to certain counter-cultural positions. The feminist discourse, for example, is particularly developed in the videos, although *Lemonade* constructs its own version of the imagined – a narrative about celebrity or stardom, which combines images filmed for the purpose with previous documentary footage of varying visual quality and definition. In her video for *Formation*, a key track on the album, she reasserts "the absence of an organized direction of black political discourse" where "the logic of style manifest[s] across cultural surfaces in everyday life [to] reinforce the terms of shared experience" (Ball, 2016).

It is in this context that the many different presentations of characters depicting historical situations featuring the black community in the rest of the videos are understood. Portrayals of the plantation, open landscapes of the Southern United States and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans are blended with tableaux in which the individual female is empowered or directs actions and events. All this is packed together with multiple tableaux of group choreography to create conceptual-performance music videos with a visual impact.

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ALL NIGHT	*SORRY*	*SANDCASTLES*	*FORMATION*

Figure 1. Tableaux from several music videos belonging to Lemonade (2016).

The visual jigsaw of the personal and the political in *Lemonade* expands the possibilities for narration, moving it away from the linear and offering a new (activist? alternative?) proposal for how African American women are represented. Its origins in a commercial project caused controversy among critics and fans but I believe that they are the continuation of a tradition within popular music:

> *Lemonade* was seismic in terms of the representation of black feminism in the mainstream. For all of this, she has the right to be celebrated. Beyoncé has indeed facilitated a discourse that explores the place of famous women as agents of both political and monetary prowess. Yet Beyoncé's political message is also squarely a capitalist one. Her videos are meticulously constructed in order to cater to an eager fan base. In this context, the merchandising, the songs, the videos, the performances must always be considered first and foremost as an advertisement for Beyoncé's commercialized materiality. The fans are essentially buying into Beyoncé. (Fairclough, 2018, p. 127)

Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer* (2018) (*an emotion picture*,[3] as its creators describe it and as advertised) is a different format from those previously mentioned. This longer narrative film is set in what appears to be a huge biotechnology company, where the identities and memories of queer people of colour are controlled and erased. The performer leads the storyline, in which she tries to hold on to and remember her past experiences. These mini episodes make up nine videos included as musical numbers – or breaks – in the storyline, titled *Crazy, Classic, Life, Take a byte, Screwed, Django Jane, Pink, Make me feel* and *I like that*, in that order.

With *Dirty Computer*, Monáe has created a fresco on sexual liberation, her motivation being that she defines herself as queer, gay and pansexual. The videos are characterized as conceptual-performance: they present a situation in interior and exterior scenes mainly using groups of performers in an upbeat and relaxed atmosphere with Monáe as the central character. People of all races and classes interact affectionately and perform duet and group choreography on different sets.

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3   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdH2Sy-BlNE

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Screenshots of each performance scene from the *Dirty Computer* clips.

Figure 2. Tableaux from *Dirty Computer* (2018).

Lastly we can discuss Rosalía, the dazzling performer with two LPs: *Los Angeles* (2017) and *El Mal Querer* (EMQ) (2018). The first is notable for its collaborations and cover versions of classic material. The second marks a specific transition towards urban music genres blended with flamenco, which she studied at the Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya. *EMQ* is still under construction as a visual album as videos are only available for episodes 1, 3, 4, 7 and 8: *Malamente* (Chapter 1. Augurio); *Que no salga la luna* (Chapter 2. Boda); *Pienso en tu mirá* (Chapter 3. Celos); *De aquí no sales* (Chapter 4. Disputa); *Reniego* (Chapter 5: Lamento); *Preso* (Chapter 6. Clausura); *Bagdad* (Chapter 7. Liturgia); *Di mi nombre* (Chapter 8. Éxtasis); *Nana* (Chapter 9. Concepción); *Maldición* (Chapter 10. Cordura); *A ningún hombre* (Chapter 11. Poder). It is easy to identify the connection between these titles and those on *Lemonade* and the intention to abstract general concepts around feelings and emotions.

This album by Rosalía is musical storytelling inspired by the anonymous thirteenth-century novella *Flamenca*, a tale of violence and a woman's struggle to achieve her freedom. The songs are one element alongside the live performances (where she presents her songs. Some are large and free to enter and others are exclusive, such as her performance at Sonar thanks to her work and contacts) and content uploaded to social networks, mainly Instagram, commenting on her work and responding to fans and *YouTubers*. From the perspective of a pop star, her command and use of transmedia elements should also not be understated. She hybridizes media and strategies from separate elements, and her videos with Instagram language have diverse consumer appeal, their entertaining content leading fans from one type of media to another.

The features prompting the description of the EMQ project as a visual album, which are related to iconography and the appropriation of symbols inspired by Spain, lead the analysis to review its ability to generate visual unity and thematic coherence. The hybridization of musical, literary and visual traditions on the album blends influences from flamenco (music), the medieval (literary inspiration) and the urban (choreography elements and rap and trap references).

The settings for the videos recreate places typified in the collective imagination of the flamenco music genre. Visual motifs are used as atomized actions or *tableaux vivants* in which the events do not become the narrative but instead unfurl as representative scenes or rec-

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ognizable situations in the Iberian imagination: the scooter, the bull, domestic interiors, suburban exteriors and empty neighbourhoods. They are repeated in videos such as *Malamente*[4] and *Pienso en tu mirá*,[5] in particular. Slow motion works as a visual poetic device. It is a classic technique in the contemporary conceptual music video, in which production company CANADA is well-versed.

Video spin-offs produced by fans imitating scenes or sections of the dancing are posted on YouTube, Twitter and Instagram, and inspire professional[6] and amateur[7] choreography from around the world, tutorials,[8] parodies[9] and reactions by hundreds of performers.[10] Rosalía responds on her Instagram stories by talking about dance moves, uploading all her performances and analysing and re-analysing videos by the many *YouTuber* fans who study her visuals and music. The video analysis by *YouTuber* Jaime Altozano is one of the most-watched videos related to Rosalía on YouTube.[11] In reply, Rosalía recorded another video as a conversation with Altozano about the writing decisions on her album. The video can be found on her official profile.

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4 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rht7rBHuXW8

5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_4coiRG_BI

6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_4coiRG_BI

7 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZ_0_qDMuAs
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U90DhfGk0Og

8 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7V1JEaQdxE

9 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I03Z-hqMb64

10 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBV9CeuxmQo
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9L3dwNAsbxw

11 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NgHXFTgaVT0

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Conclusions

The changes in how culture is produced following the digital revolution have created new links between media and the ways in which they create content, while also introducing a significant element of fun. Transmedia is a type of communication and cultural content creation that is mediated and managed through different channels and formats. It brings together all media, laying it out before the consumer/viewer and enabling them to personalize the experience of consuming culture. The purpose of *transmedia* music experiences is to create authenticity, an essential feature of popular music and a function of its promotional formats such as the music video.

Combining opportunities to add value, the visual album continues in its search for a narrative of authenticity for popular music: all tracks have their own video and they interact with each other to create a broader, more complex and open conceptual message, a metanarrative for the performer and the musical genre, constructed using recurring leitmotivs with the same emotional or symbolic resonance.

On the other hand, the visual album is a construct for the viewer to immerse themselves in the world of the performer in a way that is coherent with their live shows and performances. In it, the viewer's experiences around a band or group converge or are created by maximizing the opportunities for them to take place. The totality of this experience around the performer and its relationship with the concert experience is linked to a central function for social networks, which allow musicians to complement their message by uploading content in dialogue. The videos of the visual albums by Beyoncé (*Lemonade*), Rosalía (*EMQ*) and Janelle Monáe (*Dirty Computer*) are all presentations of personal storyworlds. They try to consolidate atmospheres, tableaux and visual motifs in response to lyrics, videos or previous covers and, in general, to everything that comes from the performer's imaginary world. Whether their work creates a tension between personal biography and the history of groups that have suffered discrimination (Beyoncé), problematizes sexual diversity (Monáe) or is an album in progress inspired by narrative (Rosalía), all the variants of the modern-day visual album are composed in synchrony with or continue the tradition of the story of popular music, in which performers invest in their physical presence (concerts) and their visual and virtual presence (social networks) for the long term and with all the available media. The construction of their imaginary world and its promotional – in other words, commercial – exploitation in a context of saturation and competition demands it.

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