

MONDAY, OCTOBER 10TH, 2022

THE TEXAS ORATOR

academic-ish



CULTURE

A SUBJECTIVELY OBJECTIVE RANKING: THE 21 BEST MUSIC VIDEOS OF THE 21ST CENTURY

BY CADE STONE ON NOVEMBER 29, 2019 • (2 COMMENTS)



Imagine you like something. Like, *like* like it. Like it deep into your free time and maybe a bit too much and why are you spending your Friday nights like this — better clear the browser history just to be safe — where are we, the sweatily obsessed, going with our lives?

I watch too many music videos. Far too many, beyond the endearing and quirky and into more concerning territory. Attempts to weave this into conversations usually whiff. I am left blinking in the harsh light like emerging from a subterranean YouTube spiral, unsure of the date or president but too algorithmically locked-in to turn back now. You know?

Just between us, I occasionally worry that slow-mo lamborghinis and twerking women are tattooed into the dark side of my eyelids by now. I convulse in my sleep, visions of lens blurs and blunt smoke dancing in my head.

Anyways. I finally made a list, and it has helped enormously — a playlist and scaffolding spreadsheet complete with oppo research, one unified sink of unconscionably wasted time stored a link away, no stammering necessary.

The playlist that helped congeal this concerning hobby is [here](#)

(https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLsZeQ1IPflcoSrx_vyiYySfHPPJ7SbxNE), the definitive hyperlinked spreadsheet [here](#)

(<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1UdyJycpVDXsToNdggTzzHCylgUyKI7aBZ4p33POd6-U/edit?usp=sharing>).

Look, we both know full well that articles like this don't get made without some losers being assigned, enemies forged, preposterous subjective judgments made and defended before the ire of stans everywhere. We know that these things are inevitable.

Well, I'm doing it anyway, and you're affirming me all the while. So here, subjectively objective and vice versa, are the 21 best music videos of the 21st century.

But Cade, why just twenty-one, why limit it to the century you just so happen to have spent most of your life in? And consider the recency bias Cade, and why all the rants and run-ons? Why so much rap?

I might say something about the ripening of the music video over the course of time and more broadly affordable technologies or reel off content about rap videos as the most elastic, explorative, edge-setting and evocative.

Or I might remind you that this is my list; I made it and my editor said I can do what I want. I am an Objective Journalist.

Without further defensiveness, let's begin:

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21. "Sicko Mode" feat. Drake / Travis Scott (2018) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ONRf7h3Mdk>)

I worry that I've already offended you, but wait: this video is one crucial step removed from a paradigm that the best rap videos define themselves against. It is multivarious and curiously deep, with its innocuous creativity tucked under massive trappings of a mega-rap Drake-headed blockbuster.

The quintessential rap video consists of the following: three to five interchangeable shots of a rapper lip syncing their way through slightly different arrangements of jewelry, cars, and women, each treated as equally fungible objects of display. It shows its deck of shots within thirty seconds but

cycles through them for a few more excessive minutes, finally throwing in a few shots of **Beats** (<https://www.complex.com/music/2014/07/blatant-beats-by-dre-product-placement-in-music-videos/dangerous>) headphones and **Cristal champagne** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfxFTG3ZE0Y>) to cover the overhead before calling it a wrap.

I generalize, but as an exercise try to sit and watch this video and “**I Get the Bag**” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u014xGYwWd4>)” back to back. Compare, contrast, etc, and see that both are videos bedecked in A-List rappers and scantily-clad setpieces; both purport to be legitimate rap videos as we have come to expect. But you, esteemed viewer, know better. You see the divergence, the dynamism and regeneration and dozens of unique shots of “Sicko Mode” almost never repeat because they’re busy moving on to the next one. You, in your discernment, see the greatness within the boundaries. You can tell that this thing hinges on a mold averted.

And it goes without saying that Xanax should never be recreationally abused under any circumstances.

20. “**EARL**” / **Earl Sweatshirt (2010)** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSTQ4oKNmEo>)

I’m a sucker for a good debut. They’re bereft of baggage. They offer up the medium as an inaugural venture, a new backdrop for outrage of all sorts — for example, opening lines like “I’m a hot and bothered astronaut / crashing while jacking off to buffering vids of Asher Roth eating applesauce.”

This fish-eyed frenzy announces Earl as a lyrical typhoon and Odd Future (OFWGKTA) as the heirs of a particular moment. They enter, clutching this brutal grunge anthem soaked in their soon-to-be-signature catalytic controversiality. They enter with their intentionally outrageous brand pushed up to the front of itself, all immediate and yearning and manifest, like one of those dog breeds that never lets go once their teeth are in you. It is a mosh pit overrunning your dividers, coming for your clutched pearls. They enter perfectly fitted to the moment, the media, the memed merchandise and meteoric virality that would balloon into a definitional early-2010’s zeitgeist.

Despite it all, despite Odd Future and co. ingesting a cocktail of various drugs before puking blood across Los Angeles and potentially drowning (results unclear), Earl’s lyricality is never overwhelmed. Their chaos is mutual, Earl’s domain is limitless, and we are rapt, knowing that his wordsmithing will somehow only get better from here.

And yes, it’s better than Yonkers. Wait until the honorable mentions.

19. “**No Handlebars**” / **Flobots (2007)** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLUX0y4EptA>)

Between us, I have ended up featuring far fewer animated videos in this Objective Ranking than I anticipated. It falls to me, here, to advocate for the

form — imaginative, frequently bizarre, and even less hinged than its live-action counterpart, it is very beautiful and very hard to do and very neat.

Among the millions who consumed Flobots' bizarre inky dystopia was my own father (Paul), inexplicably downloading five (and only five) music videos onto his original iPod (hulking and antiquated and occasionally hijacked by his children). Five radiant and random videos, settling over my fragile psychological development for better or worse — and this one here as the warped vanguard.

Yes: every one of the five has made it into this list, but the particulars are for me to know and you to tease out as you untangle these many peculiar knots (rather vulnerable, this whole exercise). And no: I will not apologize for my childhood impressionability or my continually hopeless partiality, soaking through this wholly unreliable list — though I can at least bring you along to the seared creases of my way-back soft tissue onto which these meandering things are branded.

I submitted this video for a middle school assignment intended to encourage the close-reading of song lyrics. I annotated the lines and wrote up my discerning opinions; I looked on as the video was run through the overhead projector for the benefit of the amassed sixth-graders; I sweated and saw it bomb in real-time. I suppose that the repetitive screams of “I can end the world in a holocaust” during the closing act were, admittedly, jarring, but the chalky tale preceding it of two friends tumbling down increasingly divergent monotone lives (like nonmanual bicycle operation, swerving) was certainly an ominous start. We really don't need to linger on this.

My unflagging devotion to this video almost got me red-flagged as a psychological risk and I present it to you now without further comments.

18. “Enter the Ninja” / Die Antwoord (2010) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cegdR0GiJl4>)

Time has run low and I am made to pick just one video from the sprawling Die Antwoord canon. I again chose a debut, a bellowing introduction from its (literally descriptive) name down to the grimy cartoons and alien body doubles.

This might be the only band for whom I am able to insist on this point: if you like this video, you will like every single one of them, probably more and more as they bore themselves further into your neural pathways — epilepsy risk ever present. I recommend rolling into “**I FINK U FREEKY**” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Uee_mcxvrw&)” and “**Ugly Boy**” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMK0prafzw0>)” for maturing directionality and directorial budgets, and exactly the same amount of chromatic lunacy.

Die Antwoord is Ninja and Yolandi Visser’s Capetown hip hop group influenced by the South African countercultural movement known as *zef* and none of that matters because they are irreplicable. Categorizations and clever exegeses crumble under the weight of their blazing idiosyncrasies — but don’t take my word for it.

17. “Bad and Boujee” / Migos (2017) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-sJp1FfG7Q>)

This video arrives at this spot by the strength of its clout — the sort rolling off of this song in clouds as it impacted itself upon the zeitgeist in mid-2017. It landed in a moment terraformed for its arrival, the perfect thing for the perfect time and why is Lil Uzi Vert riding a four-wheeler, what street in Atlanta did they overwhelm for this?

It presents a two-part thesis in its title and spends the rest of the video adhering, at all times, to one or both of those parts — designer champagne and Cup of Noodles, diamond rings and chicken grease, Chinese takeout in Chanel boxes. Quavo reminds you to always overdress for the liquor store.

Is this the most experimental or genreless video featured here, no; is it for you if you prefer independent films and intricate metaphors, absolutely not. But, furthermore, YEAH YEAH YEAH YEAH YEAH (<https://youtu.be/T9MZJoW0v6A>)...

16. “Don’t Touch My Hair” feat. Sampha / Solange (2016)

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTtrnDbOQAU>)

Someone far more clever than I once opined that Solange is the proverbial moon to her sister’s star, the herbish nights at home to the liquid nights downtown, and they were right.

So too is the shadows and symmetry and a burnished Southern cityscape, as consummate a coordinator of ensembles as anyone currently working, familial or otherwise — see her **performance art** (<https://www.surface.com/articles/solange-knowles-is-not-a-pop-star/>), see the vast arrangements of color and space bent to her intent. She seems to use music as an excuse for what she’s really interested in, undergirding and integrating yawning space, black bodies, rippling fields of rugged movement and elemental tensions.

Luckily, we might stand by as she works through her impressions: of growth (“Cranes in the Sky (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0qrinhNnOM>)”), of space (“Things I Imagined / Down with the Clique (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZnHnZ7iNzA>)”), of joy (“Binz (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=83LeK-t-kTw>)”), and of rage (<https://youtu.be/wUKEbMDIR08>). Sorry.

This video is a sink of what makes Solange spectacular — soak yourself her eddies and reemerge, baptized in the church of Knowles.

15. “Hollaback Girl” / Gwen Stefani (2004) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kgjkth6BRRY>)

There is something inchoate and elemental within me, Reader — gnawing and unnamed since before I had the words to pin to it.

Imagine my relief upon realizing that, all along, it had been a cerebral splinter, lodged and bearing the memory of Gwen Stefani leading a full marching band through the halls of an anonymous high school into a consummating jubilee on an inexplicably backlit “final countdown” type stage — all the while wearing booty shorts and a padded marching jacket reading BANANAS. Maybe it took good therapy and heavy drinking to finally shake it loose.

Drumlines roll like thunder crackling over the early 2000s and popstars rushing into high schools all decade long to film their videos, I still can’t crack that, and would you just *look* at Gwen’s beanie and tank top and careening cheerleading extras and it’s spelled *b a n a n a s* don’t you ever forget it. How could you after this assault?

No, actually, please help — how *do* you forget or get it out of your head it’s been echoing for weeks I think Gwen is the new voice of my inner monologue but it’s jammed on *A N A N A N A N A N A N...*

This sh*t, is: getting out of hand.

Let us set pathologies aside (and yes, my social media bios included “banana enthusiast” for several years and yes, I wrote a **research essay** (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1C86jnshLdCmIe9Izm0d0LRFGaB0uzCLa/view?usp=sharing>) about them, note the date). Standing alone, this video punches every (hanging) chad of the mid-‘naughts; of the admittedly rigid dogma of pop performance (the convertible, the pop-locking jumpsuits, the endless school-centric parties like we still can’t shake Nirvana (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTWKbfoikeg>)); of Gwen Stefani seizing the pop baton of an incredibly inundated era, smelling of digital cameras and shoulder-pads, and deserving to be there.

Super kawaii

14. “The Real Slim Shady” / Eminem (2000) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJOSHU_7_1w)

I am a sappy and admitted lover of alter egos. This video weaponizes such a prolific and seamless presence of copiously bleached body-doubles (shadygängers?) that one is left squinting to discern who is who, where Marshall has gotten to, alone and wondering — who *is* the real Slim Shady?

“*You think I give a f*ck about a Grammy?*” — no Slim, I don’t, and it turned out to be mutual. This video won Video of the Year at the 2000 MTV Music Video awards, while the equivalent Grammy went to Korn.

Korn, or “Freak on a Leash.” What praise could I possibly heap on this video that would exceed that?

This makes you miss an era, a sound, and a bleach-blond sociopath who reverberates through this song like a hall of mirrors with parental supervision advised. It is refractively insane and compulsively rewatchable and I would recommend you do so immediately.

I will watch the Korn video the day hell freezes over and Eminem endorses Trump.

13. “Apesh*t” / The Carters (2018) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2bUlfR5VMA>)

If anyone might be allowed onto this list twice, need I defend the fact of it being Beyoncé? Take it up with The Hive at your own personal risk.

Ask yourself: who else could bestride the Mona Lisa and exceed it? Who else could elicit this level of delight in righteous reclamation, in sublime juxtaposition and stark symbolism and striving to re-canonize the sweep of Western Art? The answer is a rap video wrenched towards High Art by the only artist who could manage, this is more treatise than entertainment. Perhaps Beyoncé (oh, and Jay-Z is here also) couldn't think of anywhere else to unveil this iteration of themselves, their marriage, their sovereignty over a chosen dominion.

Doubtlessly meaningful art history that far exceeds me and evident excellency that does not both spend four panting minutes thrumming through the Louvre — rented, hollowed, and refilled as a testament to black excellence and overwhelming clout. They culminate in an assertion with no oxygen for dissent, as breathless as this run-on.

12. “Chop Suey” / System of a Down (2001) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSvFpBOe8eY>)

True: this video fails a central tenet of my unified theory of a Good Music Video, the one every band with a guitar seems intent on violating — namely, *don't spend your video standing on a stage performing a song*. That's what your shows already are, I can schlep into any stale tavern in any washed up bar district and see the same; that's the thing that happens when you pick up instruments in a garage and start wailing. Why would it also be what you choose to do with an unbounded media? Why the sameness, why then rigidity? Why self-imposed limitations?

False: this video is limited by its decision to stick, ostensibly, to the experience of one live show.

True: this video is an electric spectacle splayed across a dozen brilliant camera contortions warping the video in on itself as it torques the undulating performers and the manically suicidal lyrics.

False: this video leaves you something less than steaming in the ambient heat.

Watch: the swooping shots underfoot, around guitarists, over sweatily moshing masses; the superimposed singers bobbing in and out of one another; the fixed camera, pre-GoPro party shots like Project X scenes strung with electric guitars; the frenzy of the thing, most of all — can you resist the rapture? Can you fight the gravity seeming to erase the lines between you and the crowd, the sinking immersion of your new media?

This video wraps into itself like a calcified meteor hurtling towards a genre and moment. How could any punk, metal, or rock-adjacent video of any ilk hope to avoid the fallout? It does all this *and* just happens to be another of Dad's Five, easily the angriest, and you can't stop me now.

11. “Never Catch Me” feat. Kendrick Lamar / Flying Lotus (2014)

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lXD0vv-ds8>)

This is my favorite music video, or so I tell people when so cornered. This is by Flying Lotus and Kendrick is merely the feature so do NOT try me on repeat-rapper grounds.

This world of ours is far too short and largely meaningless and you are watching as the world turns. You are reading my letters with a certain voice in your head — tell me about it. You are making each successive second, just for yourself. You are storing them up one after the other like an accordion folder out of *Bruce Almighty*, your life is nothing but these accretive consecutive slices. You are a series of overhead projector slides stacked one atop another for roughly eighty years before summarily being swept aside off of the lighted table.

This video is several seconds of mourning metaphorically, backlit by its knowledge of the end. This video and its upcast eyes and its buoyant black totality are beautiful.

I will not be defending beauty today, no sir.

10. “Bad Romance” / Lady Gaga (2009) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrO4YZeyl0I>)

One could be forgiven for letting her massive and precipitous movie-stardom blunt Lady Gaga's essential insanity from their fresh memory. One might even see her, at a glance, as an exciting but somewhat familiar renaissance celebrity burnished into a palatable red carpet type.

One must acknowledge that these individuals simply blocked out the entirety of the mid-2000s, perhaps for good reasons.

This selection should serve as a reminder. Think “2001: A Space Odyssey,” but kinkier. Think “Stranger Things” in latex but the very opposite of eighties sentimentality, like the thing is trying to be so shocking that you can only fully exist in the moment you're sharing with it. Think disco but in a parallel reality where humans pivoted to cannibalism.

Like Gaga herself and every production (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vgw0idklwuI>) she's ever touched, this video warrants and demands your fascination.

9. **“This is America” / Childish Gambino (2018)** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY&list=PLuZqx7YitjbXphbU6iW6VcONgcKVIFkWZ&index=5&t=0s>)

Sometimes that certain someone will come along who seems tailor-made to your specifications, squatting over every quadrant of your internal Venn diagram. Sometimes the stars align or go into retrograde or something. Sometimes one video does it all, furiously filling out an overambitious artistic vision without ever seeming frantic, entering each scene like someone walking through consecutive moments as flourished reintroductions.

Taking up all of itself.

The week of this video's release I didn't know that it was flawless, just that I seemed to be binge-watching it as deadlines for finals week scrolled by. I inhaled every thought piece on every metaphorical layer lacquered onto every frame of the thing — did you catch the white horse? The cell phones? I seemed to be riding a groundswell of viral frenzy, grappling for a handhold on a ballooning phenomenon.

Think about greatness in terms of sheer replicability, like that song that stays stuck in your head until you relent and replay it.

The video would go on to soaring accolades and frantic enshrinements of Childish Gambino's genius. It would become overwatched and overdone and beaten to death by collegiate pretension; it would become iconic by any definition — and I still love it like day one.

Acknowledge all this, account for it in your subjective internal discernments — but first, switch off intellect and let the density wash over you, again and again, and again. Press “0” to replay video.

8. **“L\$D (LOVE x \$EX x DREAMS)” / A\$AP Rocky (2015)**
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEG2VTHS9yg>)

This video is an excuse for the prettiest rapper alive (and it's not even close) to parade underneath the glowing neon plasma of an unnamed city (with an honorable mention to Big Sean) under the kaleidoscopic influence of serious psychedelics.

This is a literal trip into a space and mind gleefully addled by drugs, all of which Flacko seems to maintain ultimate control over. It forays into the frequently feckless territory of videos attempting to depict the extrasensory experience of a good bender and succeeds admirably.

This video singlehandedly convinced a sheltered suburban youth to try LSD and then frequently tell people about it, while professing this his now-favorite music video and thinking himself edgy.

This video perfectly executes the splicing of a separate song into the middle of the original, another deft doing, and establishes a blueprint for a portfolio of brilliant videos spanning the rest of Flacko's endlessly experimental career.

This is a shameful overuse of the whole structural “repeat the first word of the sentence over and over and then abruptly end the write-up” shtick, but one can only dissect a video in so many ways.

7. “Fergalicious” feat. will.i.am / Fergie (2009) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5T0utQ-XWGY>)

What if Charlie and the Chocolate Factory was rated PG-13 due to excessive cleavage and egregiously misappropriated frosting?

What if you watched a single hypnotically sucroded video on a family road trip so many times in a row that you could still recite the *Fergalicious definition* rap when pressured into it at your first college party? In order to impress a girl you would never speak to again?

What if Will.i.Am narrated? A question we should all be asking more often.

What if I'm being totally redundant because obviously you already know what I'm talking about and have been dutifully watching each video, so helpfully linked, before reading the article, obviously. What if I'm underhanding these stale hypotheticals through yet another over-conceited “what-if” motif?

I should just get out of the way.

Remember to floss.

6. “Hey Ya!” / Outkast (2003) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWgvGjAhvIw>)

3000! For the sake of everybody in the band, act like you've got some sense.

I've said it once and I'll say it again: my cardinal sin of an uninspiring music video is a band, on a stage, singing a song just like they would at any other time on any other stage, the only appreciable variation being an unconvincing lip sync. Did no one ever ask why?

Now I wanna see y'all on your baddest behavior. Lend me some sugar — I am your neighbor!

This production is genetically engineered to maximize The Funk. Funk positively oozes from every drop of every multiform version of Andre 3000 in every frame of his “solo”, every shake of every polaroid stirring The Funk into a frenzy.

I would love to see the sales trends for Polaroids in 2003. Andre should have gotten a cut. It was a radio phenomenon, and now it's a plush-green Beatles homage with more bosoms.

Shake it, sh- shake it, shake it, sh- shake it, shake it —

It's there for your enjoyment, be thee neighbor or fella or lady or other, transcending the stage it occupies and the varied fists clutching posters, polaroids, and outdated iPods swiped from parents and watched on repeat — or however you prefer to consume. It exceeds and subverts the stage that initially repels me.

Act like you got some sense.

5. “Gangnam Style” / Psy (2012) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bZkp7q19f0>)

Oh yeah? Oh yeah. We're doing this.

There is an inextricable parallelism to the respective ascents of music videos and video-sharing website from San Bruno, CA. The scope, reach, and social impact of both have collided, ballooned, and birthed the largest music streaming service of all time.

YouTube is the single largest streamer of music in the world and 29 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most-viewed_YouTube_videos) of its 30 most viewed uploads of all time are music videos.

The year is 2012; the platform is established but still rising. Enter, Psy, gyrating in a tuxedo, tugging K-Pop, horse stables, and **this** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BNB1fpfdvA>) inexplicable dance behind him. Enter the song into your head, right now; it's too late.

I legitimately could not tell you if I think this music video is Good or not, not with a gun to my head or loved ones on the line. Its true nature is ephemeral and lingers just out of your reach, it is a dream fading with the morning's light, still as haunting today as it was, rushing into every corner of digitality in 2012., Maybe this was what the Mayans were predicting.

I can at least hold up as true that this amorphous Korean thing redefined virality, international pop, and the upper limits of what we know a short video to be capable of. Watch: Psy, hypnotic and frequently gyrating. **Watch** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGfm-EGqLAs>) a thrilling history of its arrival into the horserace of most-watched Youtube rankings — watch and tremble. Watch as I did in middle school, pubescent and awed and insistent that I discovered it when it was still at ten million views.

Just watch it — but you already probably have.

4. “This Too Shall Pass” / OK Go (2010) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qybUFnY7Y8w>)

There's nothing wrong with seeking brilliance in a niche. OK GO is as narrow as it is dense; they are a puddle with no bottom. Picking one video by these maximalist music-videographic auteurs masquerading as musicians feels insufficient. Consider this a representative sliver of a brand that is still and always impossible to imitate. Please seek out their entire videographic discography (videography?), from **viral treadmilling intros** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTAAsCNK7RA>) to **massive overhead choreography** (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1ZB_rGFyeU) to... musical cars? An obstacle chord? Whatever **this** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MejbOFk7H6c>) is.

Perhaps no other band views the ceiling of the music video as optimistically, as close to totally unbounded as is yet possible. Their productions are events, jubilees that a camera happened to be there for. Theirs is the potential for irreplicable spectacle and the occupation of every viable crevice of a space, constantly asking themselves why not. Theirs is a constant artistic fingerprint — indelible, recognizable, irreplicable.

Everything they make is excellent, please watch it now. However, I have chosen “This Too Shall Pass”, because when else would I have a chance to feature a single-shot Rube Goldberg machine?

Consider this as less of a music video and more of coronation — a feat beyond you or me, worthy only of the best. Just be grateful they got the shot.

3. “Formation” / Beyonce (2016) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDZJPJV__bQ)

I suppose I should get around to defining some kind of rubric for what I'm looking for in a Good music video.

I know this to be impossible. I know the branches upon branches of nonobjective options and offshoots. I know of the endless potential axes — technological advancement, virality, artistic technique, iconicism, performance, musicality, irreverence, sheer spectacular exploration. I know that the very best ones stay with you like halated afterthoughts, like a room where a candle was just snuffed out.

I know that none of this matters when you hear the opening bars of “Formation” echoing like synthetic rubber bands across the opening to this HoustoBamaNewOrlean spectacle. It's Beyonce. Don't overthink this.

2. “Weapon of Choice” / Fat Boy Slim (2000) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQ7z57qrZU8>)

Peanut butter and jelly. Yin and yang. Song and dance. Christopher Walken and Fatboy Slim. Beige desolation and empty hotels.

Dance routines and supporting music are an archetypal pair, forever influencing performances across every medium. Think of ye olde dance halls, of Superbowl half times, of “La La Land.” Music videos are not immune, and

this is one piece of a larger homage to the magnetism and possibilities of this combination.

Oh, and of course you knew that Christopher Walken is a formerly professional dancer. You knew that all he needed was an empty hotel, a Fatboy Slim beat and a couple of escalators. You knew and saw and were changed along with the millions of devotees that helped this video balloon, linger, and rise up conventional charts of music video excellence. See my spreadsheet of opposition research (please).

Oh, and wouldn't you almost believe that Christopher Walken really *could* fly as you hunched over his glory, bound to antiquated pre-touchscreen plastics muddied by pre-pubescent fingers?

Oh, just abandon yourself to the rhythm — cause if you walk without rhythm, you'll never learn.

1. “Humble” / Kendrick Lamar (2017) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvTRZJ-4EyI>)

Kendrick Lamar is the greatest rapper alive and has never stopped evolving.

For the video to *Humble*, the flagship single off of his careeningly introspective coronation album, *DAMN.*, he turned to Dave Meyers and the Little Homies. The former is a sprawling director with fingerprints bedecking iconic music videos of multivarious genres; the latter is a front consisting of Dave Free — president of Kendrick's Top Dawg Entertainment label — and Kendrick himself. Occasionally, they make videos.

Kendrick Lamar is the greatest rapper alive and this video throttles you into acquiescence — through staggering set pieces, bald and peeled back and pulsing; in microcosmic majesty and grey poupon passages; in shuddering shots shaking you towards submission — a trick of tricamera oscillation, one of my favorite single effects.

Kendrick stitches his deification onto our rapturous retinas.

Let me take this moment to shovel a theory previously alluded to — that rap is the genre best suited to the format at hand; that the criminal counterculturalism, the grungy broadness, the inflating virality zeitgeist-ness allow it the reach, vision, and capacity to create the most stunning music videos of this oversaturated moment. I got ahead of myself: that's the whole theory.

The form at some point in time my most perfect music video was made and, why not, maybe it's this one — here, total, maximal.

For further reading: “King's Dead”, “DNA”, anything in the last five years from Schoolboy Q.

In any and every reality, this video is compulsively watchable, to the point of my near-dehydration the week of its release and impending finals be damned. It is sublime and untouchable. It tops a staggering (Pulitzer-winning) album, a dizzying jewel atop an already abundant display of opulence, Kendrick shimmering in shuffled setpieces like settling into a throne while white smoke streams in Rome.

It is the greatest music video of the century. Bitch, be humble.

.....

HONORABLE MENTIONS

“Hurt” / Johnny Cash (2002) (<https://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/00000144-0a2e-d3cb-a96c-7b2fbd30000>)

Okay. I understand why this is so high on so many lists and I enjoy Johnny Cash’s music very much. I’ve also sat and watched Johnny, nearly on death’s doorstep, point his way earnestly across this okay video and warble out some vaguely maudlin curtains and I will not bow to the hordes or their lazy nostalgia, for I am no coward. TAKE ME IF YOU CAN.

“Yonkers” / Tyler, the Creator (2011) (<https://youtu.be/XSbZidsgMfw>)

Of course, I still love this video, but I feel I have well and explained myself to the GOLFWANG caucus and unless you’re really stuck up on the eat-a-roach-and-hang-yourself bit (which I cannot deny the effect of) but here, please take an honorable mention. This did serve as a platform from which Tyler launched into a broader mainstream, riding waves of disgruntled boomers and clutched pearls to new heights of notoriety — and try looking into his all-black eyes, blinking through this maniacal “single shot”.

“Nobody Speak” feat. Run the Jewels / DJ Shadow (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUC2EQvdmY>)

In this video a UN-style caucus is interrupted by two opposing politicians, collectively rapping along to Run the Jewels lyrics, who eventually fall to fisticuffs, incite a microcosmic multinational brawl, and nearly impale one another with an American flag.

“Lose Control” feat. Ciara & Fat Man Scoop / Missy Elliott (2006)

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=na7lb09898>) I regret and mourn Missy Elliott’s exclusion from this list. I tend to associate her with late-nineties culture more than this centuries — think Gucci sweatsuits, hoop earrings, videos that look like they were filmed out from the inside of a cheese grater.

Yet hip-hop, aurally and visually, cannot be traced back through this century without encountering the influence of Missy dripping from the club-pops and baggy jeans, from the uptick of female rappers and the furious upfrontness of

her videos. This selection, while honorable, acknowledges the sheer momentum that she took into the century and the ripples she made throughout the medium

“Like Sugar” / Chaka Khan (2018) (<https://youtu.be/RecY5iZn6B0>)

A classic dancing video, never featuring the artists, with a single fascinating twist enabled and exploded by a small amount of cheaply available technology. Chef kiss.

“JoHn Muir” / ScHoolboy Q (2016) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iuq9XK6tojs>)

I’m a sucker for a fixed camera and a bounded narrative — say, the side of a car over the course of one Compton day. A splice of banal brutality.

“The Hills” / The Weeknd (2015) (<https://youtu.be/yzTuBuRdAyA>)

Maybe we are the real us when f*cked up. Maybe the Weeknd was the truest version of himself with his old haircut. Maybe he and his dread-coif have tapped into something essential, in the first-person haze of this hauntingly contained video — and who among us hasn’t staggered away from the burning wreckage of our car, our former selves, our fading sobriety? Maybe I’m in too deep, but you decide.

“Lydia” / Highly Suspect (2015) (<https://youtu.be/ev-bR9ii7Gs>)

Metaphor: drowning as proxy for the suffocations of the consumptive-addicted world. Ropes, thrashing, etc. This video headbangs as hard as it meditates on these claustrophobic themes, and nothing ends up happily. Enjoy!

“Runaway” / Kanye West (2010) (<https://youtu.be/Jg5wkZ-dJXA>)

After much deliberation, I have concluded that a thirty-minute short theme encompassing samples of every song on a fully-formed album cannot consciously be called a “music video.” Allowing this exception would open up this project to the likes of “Endless (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COH1826Q5Bk>),” “Lemonade (<https://tidal.com/browse/video/108046194>),” and other titanic self-professed “visual albums,” and I just don’t think I could help myself.

Nevertheless, this is as spectacular as it is utterly Kanyesque. It is a dedication to the church of ‘Ye, an epic of Yandhi, and I couldn’t resist linking the unabridged version. If you simply don’t have time left after the several hours of content you have, of course, consumed in full up to this point, you might also sample the **shortened version** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bm5iA4Zupek>), the four and a half minutes of the full film actually dedicated to “Runaway.”

“Sunflower (Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse)” / Post Malone, Swae Lee (2018) (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCeLHszkByNZtPKcaVXOCOQQ>)

It’s from a movie! Tailor-animated! Neat!

“Hotline Bling” / Drake (2014) (<https://youtu.be/uxpDa-c-4Mc>)

This video is more meme than music and Drake knew it all along. He tailors his image for maximum reach, even his blunders are perfectly suited.

He is the Kris Kardashian of the rap game, and you need to see this video to truly understand his genius. Plus, the stairs thing is pretty cool.



Published by Cade Stone

Cade Stone is a fourth year Government and Plan II student originally from Austin, Texas. After abandoning an early International Relations major, he has returned circuitously to an overriding fascination with the global stage and America’s role within it. He is particularly interested in environmental policy, trans-Atlantic affairs, and institutional advocacy. When in town, Cade can likely be found at a coffee shop, local park, or one of Austin’s innumerable breakfast taco institutions. **View all posts by Cade Stone**

(<https://thetexasorator.com/author/cadestone96/>)

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While much of art appreciation and analysis can be subjective, a great critique can also be objective, based upon clarity, content, and cohesion. This article does a great job to break each of the ranked music videos down in a way that provides insight into the author's personality while not biasing the ranking themselves. Another great read from the mind of Cade Stone.

★ https://thetexasorator.com/2019/11/29/a-subjectively-objective-ranking-the-21-best-music-videos-of-the-21st-century/?like_comment=21722&wpnonce=380b17dfe6

Like

I don't know what you're talking about Mr. Hoark. This list is an abomination: all hip hop and pop. Where are the great coldplay hits!!!!!! Adventure of a lifetime? Princess of china? FIX YOU?!?!?!? This list could have used a little fixing lemmetellyouthat. AND what's with the author wrapping us up into his own inner struggle? i just want to see some good tune! 😊

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