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## Review of "Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context," by Carol Vernallis.

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## REVIEW OF: EXPERIENCING MUSIC VIDEO: AESTHETICS AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

In *Experiencing Music Video*, Carol Vernallis sets out to decode the language of music video by comprehensively exploring its three major components: music, image, and lyrics. Although few music videos are now played on so-called music television channels such as MTV and VH1, they remain influential mediated art forms, integral to song and artist promotion, making them worthy of study and analysis. Vernallis has been a fan of music videos before they even had this nomenclature, having watched artists perform on 1970s television shows such as Don Kirshner's *Rock Concert* and *The Midnight Special*. With the advent of MTV in 1981, she became an ardent watcher, interested in the language of music videos and how they work. The study of music videos was a natural fit for Vernallis, who holds degrees in music and communication. Her years of work have culminated into what could be called a handbook for understanding music videos, *Experiencing Music Video*.

Vernallis declares this book a departure from earlier work on music videos primarily because she treats music video as a distinct genre, "one different from its predecessors--film, television, photography--a medium with its own ways of organizing materials, exploring themes, and dealing with time" (x). Vernallis's work also differs from previous work on music video in that "it takes the music of music video most seriously" (x). She justifies this choice by pointing out that music videos are due solely to the existence of the songs: the music comes first, the song is often used as a guide for the video director, and, in fact, the video itself is used to sell the song. Despite this argument, she recognizes that music video is always a complex dance between music, image, and lyrics. During the course of a music video, each of these three elements is capable of driving to the forefront at one time or another.

The bulk of *Experiencing Music Video* provides in-depth aesthetic analysis of music video as a stand-alone genre by examining its many components, including music, editing, actors, settings, props, costumes, color, timing, and lyrics. Drawing on musicology, media studies, and film studies, Vernallis unpacks the language of aesthetic production techniques, examines patterns, and identifies themes. Through this detailed process she explains not only how music video works but also how the end product is formed through the relationships among music, image, and lyrics.

One of her arguments that challenges the work of previous scholars is her view that "most music videos tend to be non-narrative" (4). Despite the similarities between film and music video, she points out a distinct difference: "Hollywood film features a bundle of three media--sound, image, and text--and each, in general, serves to promote clarity and a narrative end. With music video, however, we seem to be dealing with a much higher degree of uncertainty" (142-43). Most of us have seen music videos that do not seem to make sense. At the same time, other videos may appear to lend themselves easily to a clear story with a beginning, middle, and end. However, Vernallis reminds readers of the polyvalent nature of music videos that often results in the "story" being less clear.

Vernallis's final three chapters provide close textual analyses of Madonna's "Cherish, Prince's "Get Off," and Peter Gabriel's "Mercy St." Although she concedes these video choices appear dated (especially for twenty-first-century undergraduates), these chapters not only provide great insights into one way of "reading" music videos, but also are great examples of the analytic process of this relatively new art form, using three pioneering video artists as examples.

Vernallis has a wide and deep understanding of the art form while also recognizing its commercial constraints and objectives. She also refers to a wide variety of musical styles and artists--from R and B (Janet Jackson, R. Kelly) and hip-hop (Coolio, Sean "P. Diddy" Combs) to heavy metal (Marilyn Manson, Metallica), rock/alternative (Aerosmith, Nirvana), and pop (Hanson, Sheryl Crow)--making it easier for the reader to call up examples in his or her mind (even though the reader might wish the book came with a DVD featuring all the mentioned videos).

Experiencing Music Video is an important text on the study of music video and a necessity for students, scholars, and people interested in aesthetic critique of music video (what she sometimes refers to as music multimedia). Her chapter on analytical methods is a must read, offering solid advice on that analytic process. If you are interested in the aesthetics of music video, and in decoding its language, then this is an invaluable, book.

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